



Atlantic Coast

Includes »

Nantes	597
Poitiers	602
La Rochelle	604
Île de Ré	613
Cognac	613
Bordeaux	615
St-Émilion	624
Arcachon	628

Best Places to Eat

- » La Ribaudière (p615)
- » Hostellerie de Plaisance (p627)
- » Marché des Capucins (p622)
- » La Boîte à Huîtres (p621)
- » Le Cheverus Café (p620)

Best Places to Stay

- » Maison Flore (p604)
- » Hôtel Pommeraye (p599)
- » La Baronnie Domaine (p613)
- » Ecolodge des Chartrons (p618)
- » Un Hôtel en Ville (p608)

Why Go?

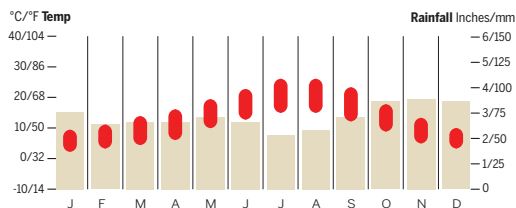
With quiet country roads winding through vine-striped hills and wild stretches of coastal sands interspersed with misty islands, the Atlantic coast is where France gets back to nature. Much more laid-back than the Med (but with almost as much sunshine), this is the place to slow the pace right down.

But the Atlantic coast can do cities and culture as well. There's bourgeoisie Bordeaux with its wonderful old centre, lively Nantes with its wealth of fascinating museums, and salty La Rochelle with its breathtaking aquarium and beautiful portside setting.

The one thing that unites the people of this area is a love of the finer things in life. The region's exceptional wine is famous worldwide, and to wash it down you'll find fresh-from-the-ocean seafood wherever you go and plenty of regional delicacies including crêpes in the north, snails in the centre and foie gras in the south.

When to Go

Bordeaux



May to June Ducklings are splashing around the Marais Poitevin and it's prime time to visit La Rochelle.

June and September The beaches are bathed in sunshine but there are no high-season crowds.

September to October Grape-harvesting season around Bordeaux, and oyster and cep mushroom season all over.

Top 5 Museums

- » Barbie will eat her heart out when she sees the walking, talking, almost living dolls on display in the Musée des Automates (p605).
- » The Musée des Beaux-Arts (p597) in Nantes contains one of the most overpowering collections of fine art in the country.
- » At the other end of the art scale are the 'out there' collections found in the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain (p617) in Bordeaux.
- » Pretend you're Alice in Wonderland in a shrunk-down world at the Musée des Modèles Réduits (p605).
- » Enrich yourself with knowledge in the Musée d'Aquitaine (p617) in Bordeaux.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bordeaux is the main transport hub for the region, three hours by TGV from Paris. From here, trains can take you pretty much anywhere in France. Nantes, Poitiers and La Rochelle are also well served by TGV, and a good rail service links most of the main attractions within the region. A car gives added freedom for the wine-tasting trail.

The region also has good air services, particularly from the UK, with airports at Bordeaux, Nantes, Poitiers and La Rochelle (all served by low-cost operators Ryanair and EasyJet, among others).

Best for Children

The Atlantic coast has plenty to keep youngsters and teenagers happy.

- » While the big boys and girls surf the waves, little 'uns can build sandcastles on the beautiful beaches of **Cap Ferret** (p630).
- » From blennies to piranhas and seahorses to giant rays, there's plenty to excite at La Rochelle's high-tech **aquarium** (p605).
- » If the kids have square eyes from watching too much TV, show them the future of film at **Futuroscope** (p603).
- » There's something about a house-sized mechanical elephant that just cannot fail to impress at **Les Machines de l'Île de Nantes** (p597).
- » Spot storks, kingfishers and pond tortoises at **Le Teich Parc Ornithologique** (p630).

TOURING THE WINE COUNTRY

If the Atlantic coast is famous for one thing, it's the pleasure of the grape. The Médoc (p625), St-Émilion, Bordeaux (p619) and Cognac (p614) are names to set a wine connoisseur's heart aflutter. Visit some of the châteaux to learn the secrets of the grape.

Off the Beaten Track

- » Arçais p604
- » Cap Ferret p630
- » Cognac p613
- » Île d'Aix p605
- » Le Croisic p600

Resources

- » Insights into the Loire-Atlantique region: www.ohlaloireatlantique.com
- » Inspiration for Poitou-Charentes: www.poitou-charentes.visite.org
- » Find out about the Gironde region: www.tourisme-gironde.fr
- » Become a wine expert: www.bordeaux.com
- » For Cognac aficionados: www.cognac-world.com

Best Birdwatching

- » Réserve Naturelle Marais d'Yves (p608)
- » Le Teich Parc Ornithologique (p630)
- » Marais Poitevin (p604)



Atlantic Coast Highlights

1 Glide through the emerald-green waterways of the **Marais Poitevin** (p604), otherwise known as the 'Green Venice'

2 Dive deep under the waves and come face to face with wobbly jellyfish and jaw-gnashing sharks at La Rochelle's incredible **aquarium** (p605)

3 Cycle the smooth, flat bike paths criss-crossing the sunbaked **Île de Ré** (p613)

4 Ride a three-storey, 60-tonne mechanical elephant in **Nantes** (p597)

5 Tour the dramatically floodlit buildings and monuments making up the world's largest Unesco-

listed urban area in central **Bordeaux** (p615)

6 Satisfy your craving for wine in **St-Émilion** (p624), home to some of the world's most famous wines

7 Hang on to your seat for a wild, cinematically simulated ride at the futuristic theme park **Futuroscope** (p603)

UPPER ATLANTIC COAST

This bite of the Loire-Atlantique *département*, where the Loire empties into the ocean, might as easily be termed 'lower Brittany'. Breton in every sense – cultural, architectural and historical – its centrepiece is Brittany's former capital, Nantes.

Nantes

POP 290,950

You can take Nantes out of Brittany (as when regional boundaries were redrawn during WWII), but you can't take Brittany out of its long-time capital, Nantes (Naoned in Breton).

Spirited and innovative, this city on the banks of the Loire, 55km east of the Atlantic, has a long history of reinventing itself. Founded by Celts around 70 BC, in AD 937 Alain Barbe-Torte, the grandson of the last king of Brittany, established the duchy of Brittany here following a series of invasions. The Edict of Nantes, a landmark royal charter guaranteeing civil rights to France's Huguenots (Protestants), was signed in the city by Henri IV in 1598. Its revocation in 1685 led to a Huguenot exodus from the region.

By the 18th century Nantes was France's foremost port, and in the 19th century – following the abolition of slavery – it became a cutting-edge industrial centre; the world's first public-transport service, the omnibus, began here in 1826. Shipbuilding anchored the city's economy until the late 20th century. When the shipyards relocated westwards to St-Nazaire, Nantes transformed itself into a thriving student and cultural hub. The city centre has now nudged past Bordeaux as the country's sixth-largest metropolis, and it's growing, with one in two Nantais today aged under 40.



Sights



Les Machines de l'Île de Nantes

GIANT ELEPHANTS

(www.lesmachines-nantes.fr; gallery adult/child €7/5.50, elephant ride €7/5.50; ☉10am-8pm; 📱) The quirkiest sight in an altogether fairly quirky city has to be Les Machines de l'Île de Nantes. Inside this fantasy world it's perfectly possible to prance around like a Maharajah on the back of a 45-tonne **mechanical elephant** with a

secret lounge inside its belly or voyage on a boat through rough and dangerous oceans where attacks from oversized squid and giant prawns are common. We can only think that Jules Verne would be smiling in his grave if he could see this lot! Gallery tickets are also good for the workshop, where you can watch these fantastical contraptions being built.

Château des Ducs de Bretagne

CASTLE MUSEUM

(www.chateau-nantes.fr; museum adult/child €5/3, museum & exhibition €8/4.80, grounds free; ☉9.30am-8pm) Forget fusty furnishings – the stripped, light-filled interior of the restored Château des Ducs de Bretagne houses new multimedia-rich exhibits detailing the city's history. Computer terminals allow you to tour the old medieval city, juxtaposed with images of today. Other exhibits to look out for include sobering documentation of the slave trade, and vintage scale models of Nantes' evolving cityscape. There's excellent wheelchair access.

Musée des Beaux-Arts

ART MUSEUM

(10 rue Georges Clemenceau; adult/child €3.50/free, 1st Sun of month free; ☉10am-6pm Wed & Fri-Mon, to 8pm Thu) One of the finest collections of French paintings outside Paris hangs in sumptuous galleries linked by grand stone staircases at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, with works by Georges de la Tour, Chagall, Monet, Picasso and Kandinsky among others.

Musée Jules Verne

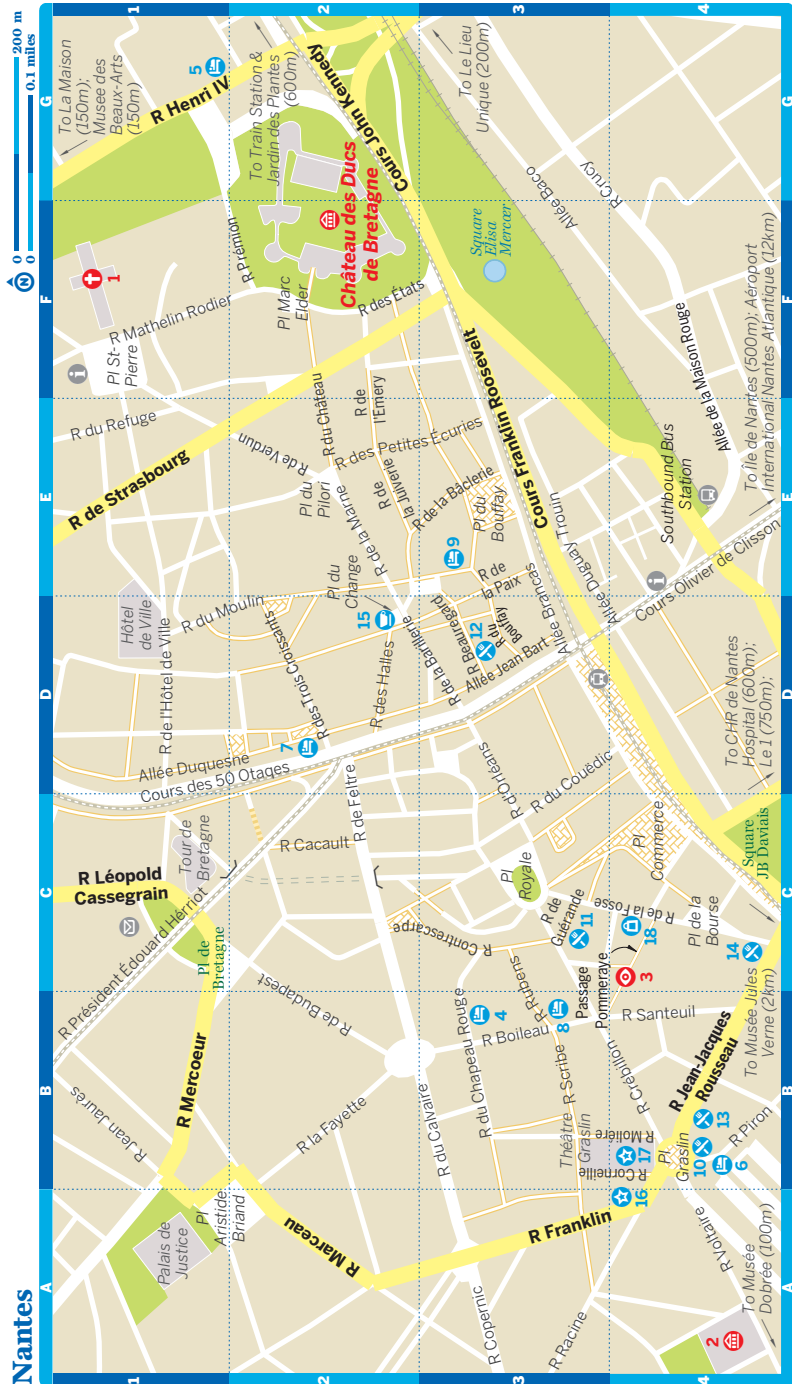
MUSEUM

(www.julesverne.nantes.fr, in French; 3 rue de l'Hermitage; adult/child €3/1.50; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) Overlooking the river, this is a magical museum with 1st-edition books, hand-edited manuscripts and cardboard theatre cut-outs. Child-friendly interactive displays introduce or reintroduce you to the work of Jules Verne,



NANTES CITY PASS

The **Pass Nantes** (€18/28/36 for 24/48/72 hours), available from the tourist office, includes unlimited bus and tram transport as well as entry to museums and monuments, and extras like a free guided tour and shopping discounts.



who was born in Nantes in 1828. Signs are in French but Verne's books, such as *Around the World in 80 Days*, are so well known that it's worthwhile visiting regardless. Wheelchair access is good. The museum is a 2km walk down river from the town centre.

Musée d'Histoire Naturelle MUSEUM
(www.museum.nantes.fr; 12 rue Voltaire; adult/child €3.50/2; ☎10am-6pm Wed-Mon) The fascinating collection of minerals, fossils and stuffed animals includes a huge whale skeleton and **vivariums** full of beautiful live snakes. There are frequent temporary exhibitions.

Musée Dobrée MUSEUM
(18 rue Voltaire; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎1.30-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 2.30-5.30pm Sat & Sun) A wonderful hotchpotch of religious treasures, suits of armour and deadly swords, dazzling jewels and shimmering ceramics – and, in a gold casket, the heart of the Duchess of Brittany, Anne de Bretagne.

Nantes

📍 Top Sights

Château des Ducs de Bretagne F2

📍 Sights

- 1 Cathédrale St-Pierre et St-Paul F1
- 2 Musée d'Histoire Naturelle A4
- 3 Passage Pommeraye C4

🏨 Sleeping

- 4 Hôtel des Colonies B3
- 5 Hôtel du Château G1
- 6 Hôtel Graslin B4
- 7 Hôtel La Pérouse D2
- 8 Hôtel Pommeraye B3
- 9 Hôtel St-Daniel E3

🍴 Eating

- 10 Brasserie La Cigale B4
- 11 Crêperie Heb-Ken C3
- 12 La Table d'Oscar D3
- 13 Le Bistrot de l'Écrivain B4
- 14 Un Coin en Ville C4

☕ Drinking

- 15 Café Cult D2

🎬 Entertainment

- 16 Cinéma Katorza A4
- 17 Théâtre Graslin B4

🛍 Shopping

- 18 Gautier-Debotté C4

Jardin des Plantes

PARK

Founded in the early 19th century, the Jardin des Plantes is one of the most exquisite botanical gardens in France, filled with flowerbeds, duck ponds, fountains and towering redwoods (sequoias). There are hothouses and a **children's playground** at the northern end of the gardens, which are opposite the train station.

Cathédrale St-Pierre et St-Paul CATHEDRAL
(place St-Pierre) Inside the Flamboyant Gothic Cathédrale St-Pierre et St-Paul, the **tomb of François II** (r 1458–88), Duke of Brittany, and his second wife, Marguerite de Foix, is a masterpiece of Renaissance art.

🛏 Sleeping

Nantes makes a good weekend break, when hotel rates often drop. Bookings (including weekend packages with freebies thrown in) can be made through www.resanantes.com.

TOP CHOICE **Hôtel Pommeraye** BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€
(☎02 40 48 78 79; www.hotel-pommeraye.com; 2 rue Boileau; s €54-99, d €59-129; ☎) Sleek and chic, this is more art gallery than hotel. The rooms have shimmering short-pile carpets and textured walls in shades of pale grey, gold, chocolate and violet. The reception and other common areas are adorned in eye-catching art such as inflated pillowcases pierced with cocktail sticks that look like some surrealist modernist hedgehog, and where you'd normally find ancient gargoyles you instead discover pop-art faces staring back at you.

Hôtel Graslin BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€
(☎02 40 69 72 91; www.hotel-graslin.com; 1 rue Piron; r €75-105; ☎) The unlikely (but very Nantes) marriage of art deco and '70s eras at this refurbished hotel includes details like eggplant-and-orange wing chairs in the lounge. Spiffy rooms feature faux timber and edgy colour combinations like peppermint and bone, plus shag-carpeted rooms in the attic.

Hôtel des Colonies BOUTIQUE HOTEL €
(☎02 40 48 79 76; www.hoteldescolonies.fr; 5 rue du Chapeau Rouge; s €58-78, d €65-78; ☎) Local art exhibitions rotate monthly in the lobby of this central spot featuring cherry-red public areas and rooms fitted out with purple, green and orange walls and boxy resin light fittings. The only minus point is that some rooms are a little small.

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

Pack your bucket and spade for any of these worthwhile coastal excursions from Nantes. The classic seaside town of **Le Croisic** centres on a pretty, half-timbered fishing harbour adjoining its old town, where shrimps, lobsters, crabs, scallops and sea bass are unloaded. From Nantes, an all-day **Métroncéane** (www.metroceane.fr, in French) train ticket to Le Croisic costs €14.50 and includes public transport throughout Nantes. En route to Le Croisic, the same ticket allows you to stop at **St-Nazaire**, where cruise ships – including the *Queen Mary II* – are built and where Airbus has a factory, which can be toured. Also along this stretch of coast is the glamorous belle-époque resort of **La Baule**, boasting an enormous beach.



Hôtel La Pérouse

DESIGN HOTEL €€

(☎02 40 89 75 00; www.hotel-laperouse.fr; 3 allée Duquesne; r €118; ♿♿♿) Styled to reflect the city's shipbuilding traditions, a wooden gangway entrance leads to this 46-room design hotel's stone-and-wood lobby, with zigzag chairs, canvas sail-like curtains, and glass bathroom basins and wardrobes. This was the first hotel in Nantes to be awarded an EU Ecolabel thanks to its policy of using Fairtrade and locally grown items at breakfast, soap dispensers that do away with packaging, air-con units that switch off as soon as a window is opened and a number of other green initiatives.

Hôtel du Château

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎02 40 74 17 16; www.hotelduchateau-nantes.fr, in French; 5 place de la Duchesse Anne; s €40-50, d €44-60; ♿) This cosy little establishment opposite the château actually thinks it is a castle. Short histories of various kings and queens grace the doors to the rooms, and the bedrooms themselves have an equally royal flavour with elegant bedspreads and old-fashioned bedside tables. Some rooms have views of the château.

Hôtel St-Daniel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎02 40 47 41 25; www.hotel-saintdaniel.com, in French; 4 rue du Bouffay; r €38-65; ♿) Peacefully situated overlooking the St-Croix church courtyard in the heart of the old town, this clean, cheery place has a variety of room sizes, including some whoppers, and a friendly Labrador dog is thrown in for free!

Auberge de Jeunesse La Manu

HOSTEL €

(☎02 40 29 29 20; www.fuaj.org/Nantes, in French; 2 place de la Manu; dm incl breakfast €18.50; ☺closed Christmas; ♿) Housed in an old converted factory with good wheelchair access, this well-equipped 123-bed

hostel is a 15-minute walk from the centre. Alas, there's a lock-out from noon to 4pm. Take tram 1 to the Manufacture stop.



Eating

For cosmopolitan dining, head to the medieval Bouffay quarter, a couple of blocks west of the château around rue de la Juiverie, rue des Petites Écuries and rue de la Bâclerie. Breton crêperies abound throughout town. West of cours des 50 Otages, rues Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Santeuil are lined with eateries.

See also the listings under Drinking and Entertainment.



Le Bistrot de l'Écrivain

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎02 51 84 15 15; 15 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; menus €14.50-18.50; ☺closed Sun) Splashed in shades of red, with wine bottles lining the walls, Le Bistrot de l'Écrivain is a relaxed and easygoing place with food that's anything but relaxing and easy to make. There's all the Nantaise standards here, but most have an unexpected twist to them – raspberries in crème brûlée and duck dipped in wonderful sauces being just two examples.

Un Coin en Ville

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎02 40 20 05 97; 2 place de la Bourse; menus from €13; ☺lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Expect flickering tea-light candles, soulful jazz and blues, and cooking that combines local produce with exotic styles, such as red curry with prawns and scallops.

Le 1

GASTRONOMIC €€

(☎02 40 08 28 00; 1 rue Olympe de Gouges; lunch/dinner menus €15/23) Legal eagles from Nantes' gleaming 21st-century law court next door lounge in the ultracontemporary bar and dine on fabulous fusion dishes at

this spot overlooking the Loire. The wine cellar is a see-through affair, with over 2000 bottles on stainless-steel racks in a glass cool room.

Crêperie Heb-Ken

BRETON €

(☎02 40 48 79 03; 5 rue de Guérande; crêpes €4.80-18; ☺Mon-Sat; 🍴) Dozens of varieties of crêpe (such as a delicious trout-and-leek combo, or honey, lemon and almond for dessert) are made with love at this cosy spot. A sure sign of its authenticity: you can order *lait ribot* (thickened milk) by the *bolée* (drinking bowl) or pitcher.

La Table d'Oscar

BISTRO €€

(☎02 40 35 44 33; 13 rue Beauregard; menus €15-25) With its frilly lace curtains and checked tablecloths, this rustic restaurant looks exactly as you'd imagine a classic French bistro should look. The food is as traditional as the decor, making it a good place to experience a slice of old France.

Brasserie La Cigale

BRASSERIE €€

(☎02 51 84 94 94; 4 place Graslin; breakfast €11, brunch €20, mains €12.50-24.50; ☺7.30am-12.30am) No visit to Nantes is complete without joining the old ladies with perfectly manicured hair for a coffee and cake or an all-out feast at 1890s Brasserie La Cigale. Several salons of original gilded tilework and frescoed ceilings are attended by white-aproned waiters.



Drinking

Nantes has no shortage of lively spots for a drink. Two prime areas are the medieval Bouffay quarter and the **Hangar à Bananes** (www.hangarabananes.com, in French; 21 quai des Antilles), a former banana-ripening warehouse on the Île de Nantes. Here you'll find over a dozen restaurants, bars and clubs (and combinations thereof), each hipper than the next. The front terraces of most face onto the Anneaux de Buren, a permanent art installation of metal rings that light up at night.

Café Cult

CAFÉ-BAR

(www.cafe-cult.com, in French; 2 rue des Carmes; ☺2pm-2am Mon & Sat, from noon Tue-Fri) Squeezed inside a darkened half-timbered house and hung with local art, this bohemian place draws a student crowd and sometimes hosts concerts. During the day it serves megacheap but palate-pleasing lunches for around €7.50.

La Maison

BAR

(4 rue Lebrun; ☺3pm-1.30am) You have to see it to believe this trip of a place, decorated room by room like a home furnished in *bad* 1970s taste, playing (what else?) house music.



Entertainment

Good what's-on websites include www.leb-oost.com (in French).

Le Lieu Unique

PERFORMING ARTS

(☎02 40 12 14 34; www.lieuunique.com, in French; 2 rue de la Biscuiterie) Within the one-time Lu biscuit factory (crowned by a replica of its original tower, which you can ascend for €2), this industrial-chic space is the venue for dance and theatre performances, eclectic and electronic music, philosophical sessions and contemporary-art exhibitions. Also here is an always-buzzing restaurant, a polished concrete bar, and a decadent *hammam* (Turkish bath) complex in the basement.

Théâtre Graslin

THEATRE, OPERA

(☎02 40 69 77 18; www.angers-nantes-opera.com; place Graslin) Constructed in 1788, the beautifully refurbished Théâtre Graslin is the home of the Nantes Opera.

Cinéma Katorza

CINEMA

(www.katorza.fr; 3 rue Corneille) This six-screen cinema shows nondubbed films.



Shopping

Pedestal statues symbolise traditional Nantais industries inside the ornate three-tiered shopping arcade **Passage Pommeraye**, built in 1843.

Gautier-Debotté

CHOCOLATE

(9 rue de la Fosse; ☺9am-7.15pm Tue-Sat) When Jules Verne was a young boy he too was awed by this beautiful chocolate shop's chandeliers, marble floors and circular velvet banquette, where Nantais have waited while their orders were filled since 1823. Handmade specialties include *mascarons* (finely ground chocolates in a dark-chocolate shell) and a rainbow of hard-boiled sweets.



Information

CHR de Nantes hospital (☎02 40 08 33 33; quai Moncousoy)

Hôtel de Police (☎02 53 46 70 00; 6 place Waldeck Rousseau) Police Nationale's 24-hour station is 1km northeast of the Monument des 50 Otages. Go to tram stop Motte Rouge.

Main post office (place de Bretagne)

Tourist office (☎08 92 46 40 44; www.nantes-tourisme.com) Feydeau (3 cours Olivier de Clisson; ☉10am-6pm, from 10.30am Thu, closed Sun) St-Pierre (2 place St-Pierre; ☉10am-1pm & 2-6pm, from 10.30am Thu, closed Mon)

Getting There & Away

AIR **Aéroport International Nantes-Atlantique** (☎02 40 84 80 00; www.nantes.aeroport.fr) The airport is 12km southeast of town.

BICYCLE **Detours de Loire** (www.locationdevelos.com; per day/week €14/59; ☉Apr-Oct) Lets you pick up and drop off bikes along the Loire Valley, including Nantes. Check the website for the current pick-up and drop-off points.

BUS The Lila bus web covers the entire Loire-Atlantique *département*. Tickets cost €2/18 per single ride/10 rides.

Eurolines (☎08 92 89 90 91; www.eurolines.com; allée de la Maison Rouge; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) Has an office in town.

CAR Budget, Europcar and Hertz are right outside the train station's southern entrance.

TRAIN The **train station** (27 bd de Stalingrad) is well connected to most of the country. Destinations include the following:

Paris Gare Montparnasse from €58, two hours, 15 to 20 daily

Bordeaux €45, four hours, three or four daily

La Rochelle from €24, from 1¼ hours, three or four daily

Tickets and information are also available at the **SNCF ticket office** (La Bourse, 12 place de la Bourse; ☉9am-7.20pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat) in the city centre.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT A *navette* bus links the airport with the Gare Centrale bus-and-tram hub and the train station's southern entrance (€7, 20 minutes) from about 6.45am until 11pm.

BICYCLE Nantes' new pick-up, drop-off bicycle system, **Bicloo** (www.bicloo.nantes-metropole.fr, in French), has stations all over town, open from 4am to 1am (but you can keep bikes overnight). Rates are just €1/5 per 24 hours/week.

BUS & TRAM The **TAN network** (www.tan.fr, in French) includes three modern tram lines that intersect at the Gare Centrale (Commerce), the main bus/tram transfer point, and a first-

for-France 'Busway'. Buses run from 6.45am to 10pm. Night services continue until 12.30am.

Bus/tram tickets (€1.50) can be individually purchased from bus (but not tram) drivers and at tram-stop ticket machines. They're valid for one hour after being time-stamped. A *ticket journalier*, good for 24 hours, costs €4; time-stamp it only the first time you use it.

TAXI To order a taxi, call ☎02 40 69 22 22.

CENTRAL ATLANTIC COAST

The Poitou-Charentes region, midway along the Atlantic Coast, scoops up a pot-pourri of attractions – from the history-rich capital, Poitiers, to the portside panache of La Rochelle, the languid beaches of Île de Ré, and the eponymous home of Cognac.

Poitiers

POP 91,900

Inland from the coast, history-steeped Poitiers was founded by the Pictones, a Gaulish tribe. The Romans built up the city, and there are numerous reminders still evident, such as extensive ruins uncovered when the large Cordeliers shopping centre was built in the town centre about a decade ago. The city rose to prominence as the former capital of Poitou, the region governed by the Counts of Poitiers in the Middle Ages. A pivotal turning point came in AD 732, when somewhere near Poitiers (the exact site is not known) the cavalry of Charles Martel defeated the Muslim forces of Abd ar-Rahman, governor of Córdoba, thus ending Muslim attempts to conquer France. The city's remarkable Romanesque churches are in part a legacy of Eleanor of Aquitaine's financial support.

Poitiers has one of the oldest universities in the country, established in 1432 and today a linchpin of this lively city.

Sights

Poitiers Churches

CHURCHES

Strolling Poitiers' history-trodden streets is the best way to get a feel for the city's past. Along the pavements, red, yellow and blue lines correspond with three **self-guided walking tours** detailed on a free city map handed out by the tourist office.

Every evening from 21 June to the third weekend in September, spectacular colours are cinematically projected onto the west

facade of the Romanesque **Église Notre Dame la Grande** (place Charles de Gaulle). The earliest parts of the church date from the 11th century; three of the five choir chapels were added in the 15th century, with the six chapels along the northern wall of the nave added in the 16th century. The only original frescoes are the faint 12th- or 13th-century works that adorn the U-shaped dome above the choir.

The 13th-century stained-glass window illustrating the Crucifixion and the Ascension at the far end of the choir of the Gothic-style **Cathédrale St-Pierre** (rue de la Cathédrale) is one of the oldest in France.

Constructed in the 4th and 6th centuries on Roman foundations, **Baptistère St-Jean** (rue Jean Jaurès; adult/child €2/1; ☎10.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon, shorter hours Nov-Mar), 100m south of the cathedral, was redecorated in the 10th century and used as a parish church. The octagonal hole under the frescos was used for total-immersion baptisms, practised until the 7th century.

Musée Ste-Croix

MUSEUM

(www.musees-poitiers.org, in French; 3 rue Jean Jaurès; adult/child €4/free, 1st Sun of month free; ☎10am-noon & 1.15-8pm Tue, 10am-noon & 1.15-6pm Wed-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat-Sun) Seven signed statues by Camille Claudel are the highlight of this little museum.

Sleeping

In addition to chains such as Ibis, Poitiers has a handful of atmospheric, well-located hotels.

Hôtel de l'Europe

HISTORIC HOTEL €

(☎05 49 88 12 00; www.hotel-europe-poitiers.com; 39 rue Carnot; s/d €55/61; 🏠) Behind a dramatically recessed entrance, the main building of this elegant, very un-two-star-like hotel with good wheelchair access dates from 1710, with a sweeping staircase, oversized rooms and refined furnishings. The annexe has modern rooms for the same price.

Le Grand Hôtel

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎05 49 60 90 60; www.grandhotelpoitiers.fr; 28 rue Carnot; s/d from €68/79; 🏠🚿) There's nothing fancy about Poitiers' premier hotel. It's just solid, old-fashioned value all the way. Faux art deco furnishings and fittings fill the public areas with character, and rooms are spacious and well equipped.

Hôtel Central

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎05 49 01 79 79; www.centralhotel86.com, in French; 35 place du Maréchal Leclerc; d €38-65) At the southern edge of a charming pedestrian district of half-timbered houses, this two-star place is a terrific little bargain. It has snug but sunlit rooms with shower or bath, and a lift to save you and your suitcases from scaling its three storeys.

Eating & Drinking

Prime dining spots tend to be south of place du Maréchal Leclerc.

La Serrurerie

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €

(☎05 49 41 05 14; 28 rue des Grandes Écoles; mains €10-17.50; ☎8am-2am) Showcasing local art, sculpture and a fantastic collection of retro toys, this mosaic-and-steel bistro-bar is Poitiers' communal lounge-dining room. A chalked blackboard menu lists specialities like *tournedos* (thick slices) of salmon, pastas and a crème brûlée you'll be dreaming about until your next visit.

Other good dining bets are the atrium-style bistro **La Gazette** (☎05 49 61 49 21; 1 rue Gambetta; menus €11-12; ☎Mon-Sat) and the green on the outside, green on the inside **La Table du Jardin** (☎05 49 41 68 46; 42 rue du Moulin à Vent; menu €21, mains €13-18; ☎Tue-Sat), serving exclusively seasonal market-fresh produce.

Information

Banks can be found around place du Maréchal Leclerc.

Meissi Cyber (28 rue Carnot; 1hr €2;

☎9.15am-2am) Internet access inside the courtyard of Le Grand Hôtel.

Post office (21 rue des Écossais)

Tourist office (☎05 49 41 21 24; www.ot-poitiers.fr; 45 place Charles de Gaulle; ☎10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm & 7-11pm Sun) Near Église Notre Dame.

Getting There & Away

The **train station** (☎36 35; bd du Grand Cerf) has direct links to Bordeaux (from €35, 1¼ hours), La Rochelle (€21, 1½ hours), Nantes (from €28, ¾ hours) and many other cities including Paris' Gare Montparnasse (from €51, 1½ hours, 12 daily).

Around Poitiers

FUTUROSCOPE

Futuristic theme park **Futuroscope** (☎05 49 49 30 80; www.futuroscope.com; adult/under

16yr €35/26; ☀10am-11.15pm, closed Jan-early Feb) takes you whizzing through space, diving into the deep-blue ocean depths and on a close encounter with creatures of the future among many other space-age cinematic experiences. **Arthur, l'Adventure** goes far beyond the realms of mere 3-D cinema and into the world of 4-D. To keep things cutting edge, one-third of the attractions change annually. Many are motion-seat setups requiring a minimum height of 120cm, but there's a play area for littlies with miniature cars and so on.

Allow at least five hours to see the major attractions; two days to see everything. Futuroscope's numerous hotels are bookable through the website, or directly at the lodging desk.

Futuroscope is 10km north of Poitiers in Jaunay-Clan (take exit 28 off the A10). TGV trains link the park's TGV station with cities including Paris and Bordeaux; times and prices are similar to those to/from Poitiers.

Local **Vitalis** bus 9 and E links Futuroscope (Parc de Loisirs stop) with Poitiers' train station (the stop in front of Avis car rental; €1.30, 30 minutes); there are one to two buses an hour from 6.15am until 7.30pm or 9pm.

MARAIS POITEVIN



Parc Naturel Interrégional du Marais Poitevin

The Marais Poitevin is a tranquil bird-filled wetland dubbed the Venise Verte (Green Venice) due to the duckweed that turns its maze of waterways emerald green each spring and summer. Covering some 800 sq km of wet and drained marsh, the marshlands are interspersed with villages and woods threaded by canals and bike paths. The whole area is becoming increasingly popular with domestic tourists, and if you want somewhere you can really melt into rural life, the Marais Poitevin waterways are unbeatable. There are two main bases from which to punt out across the waterways: the small honey-coloured town of Coulon and, our favourite, the romantic, and pretty village of **Arçais**.

Boating and **cycling** are the only way to satisfactorily explore the area and there is no shortage of operators hiring out bikes and flat-bottomed boats or kayaks for watery tours. In Arçais there are three boat operators – **Arçais Venise Verte** (www.veniseverteloirs.fr, in French), **Au Martin Pecheur** (www.aumartinpecheur.com, in French)

and **Bardet-Huttières** (www.marais-arcais.com, in French) – all of which offer identical services for the same price: kayak per hour/half-day from €12/30, boat per hour/half-day from €15/38; guided tours are also possible. Coulon has even more operators and rates are identical. Bikes can be hired from several operators in both towns for €6/13 per hour/half-day.

Getting to either Coulon or Arçais is difficult in anything other than your own car.

Sleeping & Eating



Maison Flore

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €

(☎05 49 76 27 11; www.maisonflore.com; rue du Grand Port, Arçais; s/d €57/72; ☎) On the Arçais waterfront, this is a wonderfully romantic 10-room guesthouse in which every room is painted and decorated in the colours and style of local marsh plants such as the pale-green angelica or bright, purple iris. But the environmental connection runs much deeper, with solar hot water, geothermal heating and cooling, and an organic breakfast (€9.50) of freshly squeezed OJ, Fairtrade coffee and homemade cakes and yoghurt. The hotel also donates a percentage of profits to projects providing fresh water to villages in the developing world. There's a cosy guest lounge with books and board games, and you can rent boats here.

Hôtel-Restaurant Le Central

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(☎05 49 35 90 20; www.hotel-lecentral-coulon.com; 4 rue d'Autremont, Coulon; s/d from €54/64, menus from €19, mains €16-22; ☀lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, closed 3 weeks Feb; ☎☎) Coulon's best-value accommodation comprises wood-panelled rooms, some overlooking a garden. Sublime dining is to be had at the in-house restaurant, where specialities include crispy eel, sorbet made from angelica, and a mouth-watering cheeseboard.

La Rochelle

POP 79,520

Known as La Ville Blanche (the White City), La Rochelle's luminous limestone facades glow in the bright coastal sunlight. One of France's foremost seaports from the 14th to 17th centuries, the city has arcaded walkways, half-timbered houses (protected from the salt air by slate tiles) and ghoulish gargoyles, rich reminders of its seafaring past.

The early French settlers of Canada, including the founders of Montreal, set sail from here in the 17th century.

This 'white city' is also commendably green, with innovative public transport and open spaces. It's kid-friendly too, with lots of activities for little visitors.

La Rochelle's late-20th-century district of Les Minimes was built on reclaimed land, and now has one of the largest marinas in the country. Unlike the Med with its motor cruisers, the 3500 moorings here are mostly used by yachts, which fill the harbour with billowing spinnakers.

Sights & Activities

Aquarium

AQUARIUM

(www.aquarium-larochelle.com; quai Louis Prunier; adult/child €13/10, audioguide €3.50; ☎9am-11pm) La Rochelle's number-one tourist attraction is this state-of-the-art family-friendly aquarium. A visit begins by descending in a clunky old 'submarine' to the ocean floor, where you step out into a tunnel of fluoro jellyfish waving their tentacles in time to the classical music that wafts through the aquarium. Other highlights include the huge open ocean aquarium full of UFO-like rays and fearsome sharks, the jungle area with its tree-level walkways and ponds full of teeth-grashing piranhas, the elegantly dancing seahorses, timid turtles and the bizarre half-newt, total fish mudskippers. The aim is to educate visitors to the wonders of the world's waters and the threats our oceans face. You will learn how sea cucumbers spit their guts out when frightened and then just grow another set, and – here's one that all parents can relate to – how poor mummy octopus becomes so tired at the mere thought of bringing up her precious brood that she dies of exhaustion the moment they hatch out! You should allow a minimum of two hours for a visit.

Toy Museums

MUSEUMS

(www.museeslarochelle.com, in French; 14 rue La Désirée; adult/3-10yr per museum €7.50/5, joint ticket adult/child €11/6.50; ☎9.30am-7pm) A treat for kids (and kids-at-heart) is the **Musée des Automates** (Automation Museum), a small theme-park-style display showing 300 automated dolls from the last two centuries, including a near-life-size re-creation of bygone Montmartre in Paris, right down to the Moulin Rouge and the funicular railway. Trainspotters

will love the equally appealing **Musée des Modèles Réduits** (Scale Model Museum) next door, with miniature cars, computer-automated naval battles and a tootling model railway. Both museums are wheelchair accessible.

Defensive Towers

FAMOUS LANDMARK

(adult/child €8/free; ☎10am-6.30pm) To protect the harbour at night in times of war, an enormous chain was raised between the two 14th-century stone towers at the harbour entrance to La Rochelle, giving rise to the name **Tour de la Chaîne** (Chain Tower). There are superb views from the top and a whizz-bang new permanent exhibit about the Canadian voyagers.

Across the harbour it's also possible to climb the 36m-high, pentagonal **Tour St-Nicolas**.

So named because of its role as the harbour's lighthouse (lit by an enormous candle), and one of the oldest of its kind in the world, the conical 15th-century **Tour de la Lanterne** is also referred to as Tour des Quatre Sergents in memory of four local sergeants, two of whom were held here for plotting to overthrow the newly reinstated monarchy before their execution in Paris in 1822. The English-language graffiti on the walls was carved by English privateers held here during the 18th century.

The most economical way to visit La Rochelle's three defensive towers is with the €8 combined ticket, but there are also combinations if you only want to visit two of the three.

The gateway to the old city, **Tour de la Grosse Horloge** (quai Duperré) is a steadfast Gothic-style clock tower, with a 12th-century base and an 18th-century top. For safety reasons, it's not possible to enter.

Island Hopping

ISLAND EXCURSIONS

Several islands are scattered around La Rochelle, including the nearby Île de Ré (p613), as well as a trio further south.

Accessible only by boat, the tiny crescent-shaped **île d'Aix** (pronounced 'eel dex'), 16km due south of La Rochelle, has some blissful beaches. Between the Île d'Aix and the larger **île d'Oléron** (linked to the mainland by a free bridge) is the fortress-island **Fort Boyard**, built during the first half of the 19th century.

Inter-îles (☎08 25 13 55 00; cours des Dames) has sailings from Easter to early November to Fort Boyard (adult/child €18.50/11.50), Île d'Aix (€27/17.50) and Île



La Rochelle

📍 Top Sights

Aquarium.....	C6
Musée des Automates.....	A6
Musée des Modèles Réduits.....	A6
Tour de la Chaîne.....	B5

📍 Sights

1 Hôtel de Ville.....	C3
2 Inter-Îles.....	B4
3 Musée du Nouveau Monde.....	C3
4 Musée Maritime.....	B5
5 Tour de la Grosse Horloge.....	B4
6 Tour de la Lanterne.....	A5
7 Tours St-Nicolas.....	B5

🏠 Sleeping

8 Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville.....	B3
9 Camping du Soleil.....	A6
10 Hôtel de la Paix.....	C2
11 Hôtel La Marine.....	B4
12 Hôtel St-Nicolas.....	C4
13 Masq Hotel.....	D5
14 Trianon de la Plage.....	A4
15 Un Hôtel en Ville.....	A4

🍴 Eating

16 André.....	B5
17 Aux Table Rondes.....	B5
18 Café de la Paix.....	B2
Chez Mah Monir.....	(see 19)
19 Covered Market.....	C2
20 Le Café de la Aquarium.....	C6
21 Le Soleil Brille Pour Tout Le Monde.....	C2
22 Les Quatre Sergents.....	A5
L'Estamiet.....	(see 19)
23 Lulu.....	A4
24 Monoprix Supermarket.....	B4

🍷 Drinking

25 Cave de la Guignette.....	C4
26 Merling.....	C2

🎭 Entertainment

27 La Course.....	B4
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🛍 Shopping

28 Craft Market.....	B4
29 Paul Bossuet.....	B2

d'Oléron (€27/17.50), plus sailings to Île de Ré (€18.50/11.50) from Easter to September.

La Rochelle's tourist office also has information about reaching the islands by public and private transport.

Musée Maritime

MARITIME MUSEUM

(Maritime Museum; adult/child €8/5.50; ☀10am-7.30pm) Moored at Bassin à Flot are the meteorological research ship *France 1*, a *chalutier* (fishing boat) and a tug, which together make up the Musée Maritime. If you think your job is tough, just wait until you see what the crew on these sorts of boats have to put up with on the average working day.

Musée du Nouveau Monde

MUSEUM

(New World Museum; 10 rue Fleuriau; adult/child €4/free; ☀10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) La Rochelle's role as a departure point for North America is interpreted at the 18th-century mansion housing this museum.

👉 Tours

Flanked by a 15th-century Flamboyant Gothic wall and a resplendent 17th-century Renaissance-style courtyard, the **Hôtel de Ville** (Town Hall; place de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/child €4/1.50) has guided tours in French at

3pm daily in June and September, 3pm and 4pm daily in July and August, and on week-ends during the rest of the year.

The tourist office organises a wealth of city tours throughout the summer months (adult/child €9/6), often in French only. Reservations are essential.



Festivals & Events

Festival International du Film

FILM FESTIVAL

(www.festival-larochelle.org, in French) Silent classics, as well as new nondubbed films, are screened during the 10-day film festival in early July.

Francofolies

DANCE FESTIVAL

(www.francofolies.fr, in French) A cutting-edge, contemporary music and performing arts festival held over four days in mid-July.

Jazz Festival

JAZZ FESTIVAL

(www.larochelle-jazz-festival.com) October sees jazz fans jive to La Rochelle's jazz festival.



Sleeping

During the warmer months, dozens of campgrounds open up (and fill up just as quickly) around La Rochelle and Île de Ré. The tourist office has a list of campgrounds

BIRDWATCHING

An easy 15km drive south of La Rochelle, the **Réserve Naturelle Marais d'Yves** (www.marais.yves.reserves-naturelles.org, in French; N137, Yves; ☀2-6pm Sun & school holidays) has a free nature centre, where you can pop in and peer through telescopes to watch some of the 192-hectare reserve's 250 bird species amid the wetlands. Depending on the season, you might see flocks of over 20,000 birds fill the sky on their migratory path. The website lists various guided walks and cycle rides through the wetlands (available in English), where you'll also learn about the area's 750 species of frogs, flowers and insects.

outside the town. The closest to the city is **Camping du Soleil** (☎05 46 44 42 53; av Michel Crépeau; adult & tent €13.50; ☀late Jun-late Sep). Take bus 10.

TOP CHOICE **Un Hôtel en Ville** BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€
(☎05 46 41 15 75; 20 place du Maréchal Foch; d €95-135; ☎) Everything about this smart new boutique hotel screams quality – even the pillows and mattresses are in a league above those of most other hotels. The admittedly fairly small rooms are painted in a startling white, offset through the use of dark stone furnishings. Parking's €12.50 and breakfast from €11.

Trianon de la Plage HISTORIC HOTEL €€
(☎05 46 41 21 35; www.hoteltrianon.com; 6 rue de la Monnaie; r from €80; ☎) In a quiet corner of town but only a shipmate's shout from the old town and a mere sandy shuffle from the town beach (with water so polluted bathing is actually forbidden) is this gracefully ageing art deco hotel with stained-glass windows, a curly-whirly staircase, grand dining room and multi-hued rooms.

Hôtel La Marine TRADITIONAL HOTEL €€
(☎05 46 50 51 63; www.hotel-marine.com, in French; 30 quai Duperré; d €70-140; ☎☎☎) For captivating views of La Rochelle's iconic towers, try for rooms 1, 6, 9 or 13 in this waterfront hotel by the Vieux Port. Each of the 13 rooms is individually decorated with cool, neutral-toned decor and smart designer furniture. Breakfast costs €7.

Masq Hotel DESIGN HOTEL €€
(☎05 46 41 83 83; www.masqhotel.com; 17 rue de l'Ouvrage à Cornes; r €98-138; ☎☎☎) This designer hotel takes its cue from a chance meeting between owner-creator Michel Dufour and two Balinese brothers, Hindu artists Mantra and Geredeg, whom he commissioned to paint the abstract canvases that hang in all 76 rooms as well as the artistically lit neo-retro foyer.

Other conversation pieces include Philippe Starck Carrara marble tables, and Pierluigi Cerri-designed apple-green leather chairs in the breakfast room. A couple of the ultraspacious suites have terraces. Parking's €7, breakfast €12.

Hôtel St-Nicolas BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€
(☎05 46 41 71 55; www.hotel-saint-nicolas.com; 13 rue Sardinerie et place de la Solette; r from €120; ☎☎☎) This new hotel offers smart, clean minimalist style and beds so soft and welcoming it'll be a battle to get out of them in the morning. The bathrooms have giant rain showers and the service is excellent. Parking's €7 and breakfast €10.

Hôtel de la Paix HISTORIC HOTEL €
(☎05 46 41 33 44; www.hotelalarochelle.com; 14 rue Gargoulleau; s €63, d €69-79; ☎) In a lovely 18th-century building, the hotel's sweeping staircase of polished wood leads to good-value rooms, some of which have open stone walls and all of which have plenty of splashes of colour and character. Breakfast (€12) is a hearty affair taken in the pleasant next-door café. Reduced-rate parking (€6) can be organised at a nearby car park.

Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville TRADITIONAL HOTEL €
(☎05 46 41 30 25; 5 rue St-Yon; d from €50) This bustling bistro (mains €8) with an attached hotel has just nine recently renovated rooms. The decoration is all rustic Mediterranean with roughly plastered pastel-shaded rooms, some of which come with little lounges and, sadly, blocked-up fireplaces.

Centre International de Séjour-Auberge de Jeunesse HOSTEL €
(☎05 46 44 43 11; www.fuaj.net/homepage/larochelle; av des Minimes; dm €16-18, s/d €27/38; ☀reception 8am-noon, 2-7pm & 9-10pm, closed Christmas) This popular

HI hostel is 2km southwest of the train station in Les Minimes.

Eating

The port has a plethora of restaurants and cafés, especially on the northern side. In summer, the quays in front of the Vieux Port are closed to traffic from 8pm to midnight Monday to Saturday and 2pm to midnight on Sunday, creating the ambience of a giant street party. Away from the tourist crowds, locals' favoured dining areas are rue St-Jean du Pérot and streets such as rue des Cloutiers surrounding place du Marché.



Le Soleil Brille Pour Tout Le Monde

INTERNATIONAL, VEGETARIAN €

(☎05 46 41 11 42; 13 rue des Cloutiers; menus/ mains from €13/9.50; ☺closed Sun & Mon; ☒) There's a distinctly bohemian air to this excellent little place, decked out in hippy colours. Some highly original (often vegetarian-based) dishes originate from the kitchen, much of them inspired by the tropical French islands of Réunion and Martinique. As much as possible, all the produce used here comes from the nearby market and you can really tell – plus it's one of those all-too-rare French restaurants not afraid to experiment with spices. Advance reservations are essential.

André

SEAFOOD €€

(☎05 46 41 28 24; 8 place de la Chaîne; menus €32-39, mains €17-30; ☺noon-4pm & 7pm-midnight) Opened in the 1950s as a small seafood café, André grew so popular it began buying adjacent shops. There's now a maze of interconnecting rooms, each with its own individual ambience (like a portholed cabin) but all serving succulent seafood caught the night before. You can choose your fanciful denizens of the deep from the display tables outside: 'Hello, Mr Crab, you look tasty. I'm going to gobble you up,' and with that he'll be thrown in a pan of hot water.

Les Quatre Sergents

GASTRONOMIC €€

(☎05 46 41 35 80; 49 rue St-Jean du Pérot; menus & mains from €18) Set inside a beautifully tiled, historic former greenhouse, it's still a jungle in here today with plants scrambling upward to the height of trees. Don't worry though, nothing else about this place is as untamed as the Congo; this is the city's premier address for white-

tablecloth elegance and gastronomic French fare such as frogs' legs in a creamy *pineau* (sweet white wine with a Cognac base) sauce.

L'Estamiant

TRADITIONAL FRENCH

(☎05 46 30 38 74; Échoppe du Marché, rue Gambetta; lunch menu €12; ☺Mon-Sat) Built into the market walls, this family-run place has a convivial atmosphere and draws plenty of regulars with its tasty and filling lunch menus comprising all the French bistro standards. Book ahead at lunchtime.

Le Café de la Aquarium

MODERN FRENCH

(☎05 46 50 17 17; mains €14; ☒) The Aquarium's café serves refined regional cuisine using whatever's in season locally (including a surprising amount of seafood!). There are great harbour views from the dining room and, if that weren't enough, you can also watch giant sharks cruising about – a selling point we're pretty sure nowhere else in La Rochelle can match! The café is open to nonaquarium visitors as well, but sadly you can't leave the aquarium for lunch and re-enter on the same ticket.

Chez Mah Monir

MIDDLE EASTERN

(☎05 46 37 50 56; Échoppe du Marché, rue Gambetta; lunch menu/mains from €17/9; ☺Mon-Sat) Next door to L'Estamiant (built into the market walls). Let your taste buds travel a little further afield to the souks of Iran and North Africa at the ever-popular Chez Mah Monir. It's best to book a table at lunchtime.

Lulu

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎05 46 50 69 03; 19ter place de la Préfecture; menus from €16, mains €16) Decorated in striking shades of fuchsia, Lulu is La Rochelle's grooviest restaurant, with a hip young team in the kitchen turning out gourmet fare and a lounge vibe that comes into its own during regular piano soirées.

Café de la Paix

BRASSERIE €

(☎05 46 41 39 79; 54 rue Chaudrier; lunch menu €13.50, mains €11-18.50; ☺7am-10pm Mon-Sat) A visual feast as much as a dining one, this belle-époque brasserie-bar serves up traditional cuisine like beef, duck, foie gras and fish, as well as breakfasts and afternoon teas amid the splendour of soaring frescoed ceilings and gold-edged arched mirrors.

Wine, Glorious Wine

The countryside around the Bordeaux region is full of renowned vineyards and legendary châteaux, many of which can be visited.

Venture a little further north and the Cognac region offers a totally different sort of tipple.

Cognac

1 The Atlantic coast's wine attention might fall on Bordeaux, but it isn't the only wine party in town. Cognac (p613) produces a drink so heavenly that even the angels are said to partake.

St-Émilion

2 The quintessential French wine town, St-Émilion (p624), the oldest French wine region, has a honey glow and its robust and generous wines tickle the taste buds. This is the most rewarding of the wine towns to visit.

Bordeaux

3 No wine-tasting tour of the southwest is complete without a course at the École du Vin (p619). Built on the wealth of the grape, Bordeaux (p615) lives up to its bourgeois reputation, but today an army of students has given the city a lighter edge.

The Médoc

4 The Médoc region (p625) encompasses some of the finest wine territory in France, with such grand names as Mouton Rothschild, Latour and Lafite Rothschild hailing from this area.

Secrets of the Vine

5 Learn some of the secrets of a successful bottle on a château, vineyard or cellar tour in Bordeaux (p618 and p619) and St-Émilion (p626), or on a tour of a Cognac house (p614).

Clockwise from top left

1. Barrels of Hennessy Cognac **2.** The medieval village of St-Émilion **3.** Rooftop view from Tour Pey-Berland, Bordeaux





2

SALT & TIPS



Aux Table RondesTRADITIONAL FRENCH **cc**

(☎05 46 41 31 37; 33 rue St-Jean du Pérot; mains €15-19; ☺lunch Tue & Thu-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) Those with a tiger in them craving a solid lump of meat should come to this carnivore-friendly institution. As well as steaks, it's also renowned for its *cochon du lait* (pig cooked in milk).

Self-Catering

The lively, 19th-century **covered market** (place du Marché; ☺7am-1pm) seethes with stallholders selling fresh fruit and vegetables, fish splayed on beds of ice, and just-killed meat. On Friday afternoons an **open-air market** sprawls across place Verdun.

In the old city you can pick up staples at **Monoprix supermarket** (30-36 rue du Palais).

**Drinking**

There's no shortage of places to drink along the main dining strips, but some of the city's best bars (most open to 2am) are sprinkled along the bohemian-feel rue St-Nicolas.

Cave de la Guignette

WINE BAR

(☎05 46 41 05 75; 8 rue St-Nicolas; ☺4-8pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Tue & Wed, 10am-1pm & 3-8pm Thu-Sat) On a hot summer's afternoon, try a glass of Guignette (white wine with tiny bubbles, flavoured with natural fresh fruit) here.

Merling

TEAROOM

(25 rue Gambetta; ☺closed Mon morning & Sun) For fresh-roasted coffee, head to this 1st-floor tearoom, which supplies most cafés in town with their brews.

**Entertainment****La Coursive**

MUSIC, CINEMA

(☎05 46 51 54 00; 4 rue St-Jean du Pérot; ☺late Aug-mid-Jul) The two auditoriums at La Coursive host regular concerts and non-dubbed art films.

**Shopping****Craft market**

MARKET

(cours des Dames; ☺daily Jul-mid-Sep, Sat & Sun Easter-Jun) Authentic, handmade leather crafts, jewellery, sand sculptures and more are sold by the artists themselves on the waterfront.

Paul Bossuet

WINE

(21 rue Gargouilleau) Cognac and *pineau* produced by this local vintner make great souvenirs, not least for their decorative bottles.

**Information**

There are a number of banks on rue du Palais in the old city.

Hospital (☎05 46 45 50 50; rue du Dr Schweitzer)

Hôtel de Police (Police Station; ☎05 46 51 36 36; 2 place de Verdun; ☺24hr)

Post office (6 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville) Changes money.

Tourist office (☎05 46 41 14 68; www.

larochelle-tourisme.com, www.ville-larochelle.fr; Le Gabut, 2 quai Georges Simenon; ☺9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) Sells the **Pass**

Rochelais, offering various discounts for public transport, sights and activities.

**Getting There & Away**

AIR La Rochelle Airport (☎05 46 42 30 26; www.larochelle.aeroport.fr), north of the city centre off the N237, has domestic flights as well as a variety of flights to several UK and Irish airports with Ryanair, EasyJet, Flybe and Jet2. There are also flights to Brussels and Oslo with Ryanair.

BUS From the **bus station** (place de Verdun),

Océcars (☎05 46 00 95 15) runs services to regional destinations. See p613 for bus services to Ile de Ré.

CAR Inexpensive car-rental companies close to the train station include **ADA** (☎05 46 41 02 17; 19 av du Général de Gaulle) and **National/Citer** (☎05 46 29 19 00; 17 av du Général de Gaulle).

TRAIN The **train station** (☎08 36 35 35 35) is linked by TGV to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (from €65, 3¼ hours). Other destinations served by regular direct trains include Nantes (€24.50, 1¼ hours), Poitiers (€21.50, 1½ hours) and Bordeaux (€27, 2¼ hours).

**Getting Around****To/From the Airport**

Bus 7 (Bus 40A or B on Sundays) runs from the airport to the town centre (€1.20); schedules are available on the airport website. A taxi costs about €10.

Bicycle

The city's distinctive yellow **Yélo Vélo** (place de Verdun; 1st 2hr free, then per hr €1) bikes can be picked up and dropped off from 26 points around the city.

Boat

Le Passeur (tickets €0.70; ☺7.45am-10pm) is a three-minute ferry service linking Tour de la Chaîne with the Avant Port. It runs when there are passengers – press the red button on the board at the top of the gangplank.

The ferry **Bus de Mer** (€1.30, 20 minutes) links Tour de la Chaîne with Les Minimes. It runs daily April to September; at weekends and holidays only from October to March. Boats from the Vieux Port depart every hour on the hour (except at 1pm) from 10am to 7pm (every half-hour and until 11.30pm in July and August).

Bus

Electric buses buzz around town. Local transport system **RTCR/Yélo Bus** (☎05 46 34 02 22) has a main bus hub and **information office** (place de Verdun; ☎7.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat). Most lines run until sometime between 7.15pm and 8pm. Tickets cost €1.20.

Bus 1 runs from place de Verdun to the train station, returning via the Vieux Port.

Car & Motorcycle

A free shuttle bus connects the low-cost Park and Ride (P+R) car park off av Jean Moulin.

Taxi

Call ☎05 46 41 55 55.

Île de Ré

POP 16,000

Bathed in the southern sun, drenched in a languid atmosphere and scattered with villages of green-shuttered, whitewashed buildings with red Spanish-tile roofs, Île de Ré is one of the most delightful places on the west coast of France. The island spans just 30km from its most easterly and westerly points, and just 5km at its widest section. But take note, the secret's out and in the high season it can be almost impossible to move around and even harder to find a place to stay.

On the northern coast about 12km from the toll bridge that links the island to La Rochelle is the quaint fishing port of **St-Martin-de-Ré** (population 2600), the island's main town. Surrounded by 17th-century fortifications (you can stroll along most of the ramparts), the port town is a delightful mesh of streets filled with craft shops, art galleries and salty sea views. St-Martin's **tourist office** (☎05 46 09 20 06; www.iledere.com; av Victor Bouthillier; ☎10am-6pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) can provide information for the entire island.

The island's best **beaches** are along the southern edge – including unofficial naturist beaches at Rivedoux Plage and La Couarde-sur-Mer – and around the western tip (northeast and southeast of Phare-des-Baleines). Many beaches are bordered by

dunes that have been fenced off to protect the vegetation.



Activities



Cycling

BIKE HIRE

Criss-crossed by an extensive network of well-maintained bicycle paths, the pancake-flat island is ideal for **cycling**. A biking map is available at tourist offices; in summer practically every hamlet has somewhere to hire bikes. Year-round **Cycland** (www.cycland.fr) can deliver bikes to the bridge.



Sleeping

Île de Ré is an easy day trip from La Rochelle; however, if you want to spend longer on the island (and you will), each village has a summer tourist office with lists of local accommodation options, including campgrounds and private rooms and houses.

La Baronnie Domaine

HISTORIC HOTEL €€€

(☎05 46 09 21 29; www.domainedelabaronnie.com; 21 rue Baron de Chantal, St-Martin de Ré; d from €160) Attention all kings and queens, this place, which oozes history, is so regal you won't be at all surprised to hear that it was once owned by one of your ancestors – Louis XVI.

Hôtel Le Sénéchal

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎05 46 29 40 42; www.hotel-le-senechal.com; 6 rue Gambetta, Ars en Ré; r €80-200; ☎☎☎) Somewhat more down to earth, but no less charming for it, is this place in the centre of the equally charming village of Ars en Ré. When we were visiting, a couple who were checking the rooms commented, 'Oh, isn't it cute.' We couldn't have expressed it better ourselves.



Getting There & Away

The one-way automobile toll (paid on your way to the island) is €9 (a whopping €16.50 from mid-June to mid-September).

Year-round excruciatingly slow buses link La Rochelle (the train station car park, Tour de la Grosse Horloge and place de Verdun) with all the major towns on the island; the one-hour trip to St-Martin costs €4. There are also intra-island routes.

Cognac

POP 19,850

On the banks of the River Charente amid vine-covered countryside, Cognac is

THE HOME OF COGNAC

According to local lore, divine intervention plays a role in the production of Cognac. Made of grape *eaux-de-vie* (brandies) of various vintages, Cognac is aged in oak barrels and blended by an experienced *maître de chai* (cellar master). Each year some 2% of the casks' volume – *la part des anges* (the angels' share) – evaporates through the pores in the wood, nourishing the tiny black mushrooms that thrive on the walls of Cognac warehouses. That 2% might not sound like much, but it amounts to around 20 million bottles a year – if the angels really are up there knocking back 20 million bottles of Cognac a year, then all we can say is roll on our time behind the pearly gates!

The best-known **Cognac houses** are open to the public, running tours of their cellars and production facilities, and ending with a tasting session. Opening times vary annually; it's a good idea to reserve in advance.

Camus (☎05 45 32 72 96; www.camus.fr; 29 rue Marguerite de Navarre; adult/child from €7/free) Located 250m northeast of the Jardin Public.

Hennessey (☎05 45 35 72 68; www.hennessey.com; 8 rue Richonne; adult/12-18yr/under 12 €9/7/free; ☹closed Jan & Feb) Situated 100m uphill from quai des Flamands; tours include a film (shown in English) and a boat trip across the Charente to visit the cellars.

Martell (☎05 45 36 33 33; www.martell.com; place Édouard Martell; adult/child €7.50/3) Found 250m northwest of the tourist office; last entry is one hour prior to closing.

Otard (☎05 45 36 88 86; www.otard.com; 127 bd Denfert-Rochereau; adult/child €8.50/4) Housed in the 1494 birthplace of King François I, the Château de Cognac, 650m north of place François 1er.

Rémy Martin (☎05 45 35 76 66; www.visitesremymartin.com) Two locations: the **estate** (adult/child €15/7; ☹closed Oct-Apr), 4km southwest of town towards Pons; and, in town, the **house** (adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €25/14/7; ☹by appointment), for intimate tastings in groups of eight.

The tourist office has a list of smaller Cognac houses near town; most close between October and mid-March.

known worldwide for the double-distilled spirit that bears its name, and on which the local economy thrives. Most visitors head here to visit the famous cognac houses, however, it's a picturesque stop even if you don't happen to be a huge fan of the local firewater.

Cognac's café-ringed central roundabout, place François 1er, is 200m northwest of the **tourist office** (☎05 45 82 10 71; www.tourism-cognac.com; 16 rue du 14 Juillet; ☉9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat). It's linked to the river by bd Denfert-Rochereau.

Sights & Activities

Half-timbered 15th- to 17th-century houses line the narrow streets of the **Vieille Ville** (old city), which sits snugly between the partly Romanesque **Église St-Léger** (rue Aristide Briand) and the river.

Museums

MUSEUMS

(Joint entry adult/child €4.60/free; ☉10am-6pm) At the southern corner of the leafy **Jardin Public** is the **Musée de Cognac** (☎05 45 32 07 25; www.musees-cognac.fr, in French; 48 bd Denfert-Rochereau), showcasing the town's history. The **Musée des Arts du Cognac** (☎05 45 36 21 10; place de la Salle Verte) takes you step by step through the production of Cognac – from vine to bottle.

La Dame Jeanne

RIVER CRUISE

(☎05 45 82 10 71; adult/child €7/4; ☉May-Sep; 🚢) You can float with the sticklebacks down the River Charente on *La Dame Jeanne*, a re-creation of one of the flat-bottomed cargo boats known as *gabarres*, that were once the lifeblood of trade along the river. The trip lasts 90 minutes and reservations should be made through the tourist office.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Héritage

BOULIQUE HOTEL €€

(05 45 82 01 26; www.hheritage.com; 25 rue d'Angoulême; d €70-80, mains €10-18; ) Renovated in striking shades of lime green, fuchsia and cherry red, this 17th-century mansion in the heart of town proves period elegance and contemporary style don't have to be mutually exclusive. Oh, and the 'medieval' portraits are like none you've ever seen before. Adjacent to the beautifully restored bar, the hotel's restaurant, La Belle Époque, specialises in reintroducing long-lost regional classics.


Hôtel Le Cheval Blanc

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(05 45 82 09 55; www.hotel-chevalblanc.fr; 6 place Bayard; d €56; ) Miniature bottles of Cognac in the vending machine satiate midnight cravings at this hotel (with good wheelchair access), where rooms are set around a courtyard. Although not vast, the rooms are immaculate.

Bistrot de Claude

BISTRO €€

(05 45 82 60 32; 35 rue Grande; menus from €17, mains €12-29;  Mon-Fri) Set in a lovely old wiggly timber building in the heart of the old town, this character-infused restaurant specialises in oysters and both river and sea fish.

Getting There & Away

Cognac's **train station**, 1km south of the town centre on av du Maréchal Leclerc, has regular trains to/from La Rochelle (from €15, from 1¼ hours).

Around Cognac

Within a short drive of Cognac are some fascinating towns and villages worth seeking out. Just a couple of highlights include the former Gallo-Roman capital of Aquitaine, **Saintes** (population 26,300), on the River Charente. Dating from the 1st century AD, its Roman legacies include a double arch that served as the town gate, an amazing overgrown amphitheatre built during the reign of Claudius, and an archaeology museum with unearthed statues and even a chariot and harness. Its pedestrianised old town spills over with lively places to shop, eat and drink.

Also straddling the Charente is **Jarnac** (population 5000), the 1916 birthplace of former president François Mitterrand. The house where he was born has been trans-


formed into a museum; he's now buried in the town's cemetery. The waters around Jarnac are prime for fishing.

Cognac's tourist office has details of these and other areas in its surrounds.

Eating

La Ribaudière

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(05 45 81 30 54; www.laribaudiere.com; Bourg-Charente; menus from €42;  lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Mon-Sat) This gastronomic haven is set among orchards overlooking the Charente River, in the tiny village of Bourg-Charente (midway between Cognac and Jarnac). Chef Thierry Verrat grows his own vegetables to accompany his seasonally changing, Michelin-starred creations. If the food sends your taste buds into whirls of excitement, you can keep them happy by joining one of the restaurant's **cookery courses** (€110). See the website for details.

LOWER ATLANTIC COAST

At the lower edge of the Atlantic Coast, the expansive Aquitaine region extends to the Dordogne in the east and the Basque Country in the south. The gateway to the region's wealth of attractions, set amid glorious vine-ribboned countryside, is its capital, Bordeaux.

Bordeaux

POP 238,920

The new millennium was a major turning point for the city long known as La Belle au Bois Dormant (Sleeping Beauty). The mayor, former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, roused Bordeaux, pedestrianising its boulevards, restoring its neoclassical architecture and implementing a high-tech public transport system.

Although Juppé was convicted for abusing public funds in Paris in 2004, it was soon water under the bridge for the Bordelaise, and he was re-elected to the mayorship in 2006 and again in 2008. His efforts paid off: in mid-2007 half of the entire city (18 sq km, from the outer boulevards to the banks of the Garonne) was Unesco-listed, making it the largest urban World Heritage Site.

Bolstered by its high-spirited university-student population (not to mention 2.5 million tourists annually), La Belle Bordeaux now scarcely seems to sleep at all.



Rome colonised the Aquitaine region in 56 BC; the area 100km east of the Atlantic at the lowest bridging point on the River Garonne was named Burdigala. From 1154 to 1453, after Eleanor of Aquitaine married

would-be King Henry II of England, the city prospered under the English. Their fondness for the region's red wine (known across the Channel as claret) provided the impetus for Bordeaux' enduring international reputation for quality wines.

Bordeaux

📍 Top Sights

CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain.....	D2
Cathédrale St-André.....	B5
Musée d'Aquitaine.....	C6
Musée des Beaux-Arts.....	B5

📍 Sights

1 École de Cuisine au Chapon Fin.....	B4
École du Vin.....	(see 4)
2 Galerie des Beaux-Arts.....	A5
3 Girondins Fountain Monument.....	C3
4 Maison du Vin de Bordeaux.....	C3
5 Musée des Arts Décoratifs.....	B5
6 Palais Gallien.....	A2
7 Tour Pey-Berland.....	C5

📍 Sleeping

8 Adare House.....	B2
9 Ecolodge des Chartrons.....	D1
10 Hôtel de la Presse.....	C4
11 Hôtel de la Tour Intendance.....	B4
12 Hôtel du Théâtre.....	C4
13 Hôtel Notre Dame.....	D1
14 Hôtel Touring.....	B3
15 La Maison Borde'aux.....	A2
16 La Maison du Lierre.....	B3
17 Une Chambre en Ville.....	B5

🍴 Eating

Baillardran.....	(see 19)
18 Baud et Millet.....	B3
19 Carrefour Supermarket.....	B3
20 Jean d'Alos.....	B4
21 Karl.....	D4
22 La Boîte à Huîtres.....	D4
23 Le Cheverus Café.....	C5
24 L'Entrecôte.....	C3

🍷 Drinking

25 Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville.....	B5
Bar du Vin.....	(see 4)
26 Café Brun.....	D4
27 L'Autre Petit Bois.....	D4
28 L'Orangerie du Jardin Public.....	B2

🎬 Entertainment

29 Cinéma Utopia.....	D5
30 Grand Théâtre.....	C4
31 Théâtre Femina.....	C4
32 Virgin Megastore Billeterie.....	B4

🛍 Shopping

33 Bordeaux Magnum.....	C3
34 Bradley's Bookshop.....	B5
35 Galerie Bordelaise.....	C4
36 Librairie Mollat.....	B4
37 L'Intendant.....	C4

📍 Sights & Activities

On the first Sunday of every month, Bordeaux' city centre is closed to cars, and attractions often have extended hours.

Cathédrale St-André

CATHEDRAL

Lording over the city, and a Unesco World Heritage Site prior to the city's classification, the cathedral's oldest section dates from 1096; most of what you see today was built in the 13th and 14th centuries. Exceptional masonry carvings can be seen in the north portal. Even more imposing than the cathedral itself is the gargoyle, 50m-high Gothic belfry, **Tour Pey-Berland** (adult/child €5/free; ☀10am-1.15pm & 2-6pm), erected between 1440 and 1466. Its spire was added in the 19th century, and in 1863 it was topped off with the statue of Notre Dame de l'Aquitaine (Our Lady of Aquitaine). Scaling the tower's 232 narrow steps rewards you with a spectacular panorama of the city.

Museums

MUSEUMS

(permanent collections/temporary exhibits free/€5 unless stated otherwise below; ☀11am-6pm Tue-Sun) Bordeaux has a healthy collection of museums and galleries. Gallo-Roman statues and relics dating back 25,000 years are among the highlights at the impressive **Musée d'Aquitaine** (20 cours Pasteur; temporary exhibitions €3). Ask to borrow an English-language catalogue.

Built in 1824 as a warehouse for French colonial produce like coffee, cocoa, peanuts and vanilla, the cavernous Entrepôts Lainé creates a dramatic backdrop for cutting-edge modern art at the **CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain** (Entrepôt 7, rue Ferrère).

The evolution of Occidental art from the Renaissance to the mid-20th century is on view at Bordeaux' **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (20 cours d'Albret; ☀Wed-Sun). Occupying two wings of the 1770s-built Hôtel de Ville, either side of the **Jardin de la Mairie** (an elegant public park), the museum was established in 1801; highlights

include 17th-century Flemish, Dutch and Italian paintings. Temporary exhibitions are regularly hosted at its nearby annexe, **Galerie des Beaux-Arts** (place du Colonel Raynal).

Faïence pottery, porcelain, gold, iron, glasswork and furniture are displayed at the **Musée des Arts Décoratifs** (39 rue Bouffard; ☎2-6pm Wed-Mon, temporary exhibits from 11am Mon-Fri). For your own decorative treasures, browse rue Bouffard's antique and homewares shops.

Parks

PARKS

Landscaping is artistic as well as informative at the **Jardin Public** (cours de Verdun). Established in 1755 and laid out in the English style a century later, the grounds incorporate the meticulously catalogued **Jardin Botanique** founded in 1629 and at this site since 1855.

At the vast square **esplanade des Quinconces**, laid out in 1820, you'll see the fountain **Girondins monument**, a group of moderate, bourgeois National Assembly deputies during the French Revolution, 22 of whom were executed in 1793 after being convicted of counter-revolutionary activities.

The recently completed facelift of the 4km-long **riverfront esplanade** incorporates playgrounds, bicycle paths and, everyone's favourite, a wafer thin 'swimming pool' that hot and sticky young Bordeaux roll about in throughout the summer months.

Pretty **place Gambetta**, a central open area ringed by shaded benches, also has its share of history – during the Reign of Terror that followed the Revolution, a guillotine placed here severed the heads of 300 alleged counter-revolutionaries.

Palais Gallien

ROMAN RUINS

(rue du Docteur Albert Barraud; adult/child €3/2.50; ☎2-7pm) The only remains of Burdigala today are the crumbling ruins of the 3rd-century amphitheatre, Palais Gallien.



Tours

The tourist office runs a packed program of bilingual city tours, including a wheelchair-accessible two-hour **morning walking tour** (adult/child €8/7, plus optional wine tasting €3.50; ☎tours 10am, plus 3pm mid-Jul–mid-Aug); a **night-time walking tour** (adult/child €15/10) takes in Bordeaux' floodlit buildings and monuments. Contact the tourist office for details of dozens of other tour options,

including **gourmet** and **wine tours** as well as **river cruises** in the warmer months.

See the boxed text, p619, for highlights of wine-related tours including day trips further afield, as well as wine courses.

All tours take a limited number of participants; reserve ahead.



Courses

If you need some food to go with all that wine, sign up for one of Nicolas Frion's highly regarded half-day cookery courses at the **École de Cuisine au Chapon Fin** (☎05 56 90 91 92; www.chapon-fin.com; 5 rue Montesquieu, per person €95).

Short **cooking courses** also run periodically and are bookable through the tourist office.



Sleeping

Accommodation options are plentiful across all categories. The *Découverte* ('Discover Bordeaux') package is a neat little offering from the tourist office that bundles up two nights at your choice of participating hotels along with free public transportation, free access to the city's main monuments and sights, a guided city tour, a vineyard tour including wine tasting (both tours in English and French) and a bottle of wine. Prices start at €200 for a two-night package for two people; kids under 12 stay for free in their parents' room. Book 10 or more days in advance.



Ecologie des Chartrons

B&B €€

(☎05 56 81 49 13; www.ecolodgedeschartrons.com; 23 rue Raze; s/d €98/110) Hidden away in a little side street off the quays in Bordeaux' Chartrons wine merchant district, this *chambre d'hôte* is blazing a trail for ecofriendly sleeping in the city. Owner-hosts Veronique and Yann have added a solar-powered hot-water system, energy-efficient gas heating and hemp-based soundproofing, while preserving the 'soul' of this old wine merchant's house. They've stripped back and limewashed the stone walls, scrubbed the wide floorboards and recycled antique furniture. Each of the five guest rooms has a bathroom built from natural materials such as basalt. You can curl up with a book in the lounge, access the island kitchen, and start the day with an organic breakfast, served at a long timber table.

ON THE WINE TRAIL

Thirsty? The 1000-sq-km winegrowing area around the city of Bordeaux is, along with Burgundy, France's most important producer of top-quality wines.

The Bordeaux region is divided into 57 appellations (production areas whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive characteristics to the wine produced there) that are grouped into seven *familles* (families), and then subdivided into a hierarchy of designations (eg *premier grand cru classé*, the most prestigious) that often vary from appellation to appellation. The majority of the Bordeaux region's reds, rosés, sweet and dry whites and sparkling wines have earned the right to include the abbreviation AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) on their labels, indicating that the contents have been grown, fermented and aged according to strict regulations that govern such viticultural matters as the number of vines permitted per hectare and acceptable pruning methods.

Bordeaux has over 5000 châteaux (also known as *domaines*, *crus* or *clos*), referring not to palatial residences but rather to the properties where grapes are raised, picked, fermented and then matured as wine. The smaller châteaux sometimes accept walk-in visitors, but at many places, especially the better-known ones, you have to make advance reservations. Many close during the *vendange* (grape harvest) in October.

Whet your palate with the tourist office's informal introduction to wine and cheese courses (adult €24), held every Thursday at 4.30pm, where you sip three different wines straight from the cellar and sup on cheese.

Serious students of the grape can enrol at the **École du Vin** (Wine School; ☎05 56 00 22 66; www.bordeaux.com/Ecole-du-Vin), within the **Maison du Vin de Bordeaux** (Bordeaux House of Wine; 3 cours du 30 Juillet), across the street from the tourist office. Introductory two-hour courses are held Monday to Saturday from 10am to noon between June and September (adult €25). To really develop your nose (and your dinner-party skills), sign up for one of three progressively more complex two- to three-day courses (€335 to €600) scheduled between May and October, including château visits.

See also p625 and p626 for more on château visits and tastings.

La Maison Bord'eaux

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎05 56 44 00 45; www.lamaisonbord-eaux.com; 113 rue du Docteur Albert Barraud; s/d from €130/150; 🍷) You'd expect to find a sumptuous 18th-century château with a conifer-flanked courtyard and stable house in the countryside, but this stunning *maison d'hôte* is right in the middle of the city. Public areas include a library with shelves of books and CDs. A *table d'hôte* is available by arrangement (*menus* €30 to €150 including wine).

Une Chambre en Ville

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎05 56 81 34 53; www.bandb-bx.com; 35 rue Bouffard; s/d €103/115, ste s/d €126/138) On a street full of antique and art shops, this stylish place blends in well because each of the five rooms is an individual work of art in its own right. The decoration ranges from the plush reds and spicy pictures of the Oriental room to the Madame and Monsieur classic style of the suites. Une

Chambre en Ville is gay-friendly (and all-welcoming).

La Maison du Lierre

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎05 56 51 92 71; www.maisondulierre.com; 57 rue Huguerie; d €68-128; 🍷🍷) The delightfully restored 'House of Ivy' has a welcoming *chambre d'hôte* feel. A beautiful Bordelaise stone staircase (no lift) leads to sunlit rooms with polished floorboards, rose-printed fabrics and sparkling bathrooms. The vine-draped garden is a perfect spot to sip fresh orange juice at breakfast (from €8).

Seeko'o

DESIGN HOTEL €€€

(☎05 56 39 07 07; www.seekoo-hotel.com; 54 quai de Bacalan; d from €189; 🍷🍷) The monochrome lobby of this iceberg-shaped hotel leads to 45 retro-futuristic vinyl-and-leather-decorated rooms (some with circular beds), fitted out by Bordeaux designers. Unwind in the free Turkish *hammam*, visit the 1st-floor Champagne bar or just peruse the clever modern art throughout.

Hôtel du Théâtre

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €

(02 05 56 79 05 26; www.hotel-du-theatre.com, in French; 10 rue Maison-Daurade; s/d from €50/75; ☎) The owners of this recently renovated hotel, just off the main shopping street, have done up some rooms in an entirely classic style and some in the sun-burst colours of the Mediterranean. Our favourites are full of flashy sequins and glitter, and look like they just got home from the disco.

Hôtel de la Tour Intendance

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(02 05 56 44 56 56; www.hotel-tour-intendance.com; 14-16 rue de la Vieille Tour; s €78, d €88-148; ☎☎) Wake up to soaring exposed-sandstone walls, stone-laid floors and wood-beamed ceilings at this stylish boutique hotel tucked into a quiet corner of the city. Light-filled rooms have neutral-toned natural fabrics and fibres, limewashed timber panelling and geometric-embossed vinyl, with pebbled bathrooms screened by milky opaque glass.

Adare House

B&B €€

(02 05 56 52 48 45; 8 rue Emile Zola; s/d from €90/110; ☎) Inside a solid old Bordeaux town house, next to the gorgeous Jardin Public, this English-run *chambre d'hôte* has only two rooms, both beautifully presented in modern colours and patterns. One room has a bath to float your duck in and the other a multi-jet shower. Advance reservations essential.

Hôtel de la Presse

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €€

(02 05 56 48 53 88; www.hoteldelapresse.com; 6-8 rue de la Porte Dijeaux; d €78-98; ☎☎) Elegant touches at Hôtel de la Presse, just off the pedestrianised rue Ste-Catherine, include silk and dried flowers, and royal-red bedspreads. Service is polished and professional.

Hôtel Touring

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(02 05 56 81 56 73; www.hoteltouring.fr; 16 rue Huguier; s/d €47-55, with shared bathroom €38/45; ☎) Run with pride by a warm-hearted family, the Touring's rooms are furnished with original 1940s and '50s furniture, like flip-up school-style desks and club chairs. Most have a fridge, TV and telephone.

Hôtel Notre Dame

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €

(02 05 56 52 88 24; 36-38 rue Notre Dame; s/d €47-54; ☎) Location is the key selling point of this clean and simple hotel. It's within an easy stroll of the town centre, just back from the river and in the middle of a lovely

villagelike neighbourhood of antique shops and relaxed cafés (although it isn't so lovely at night – be careful!).

Auberge de Jeunesse

HOSTEL €

(02 05 56 33 00 70; www.auberge-jeunesse-bordeaux.com; 22 cours Barbey; dm incl sheets & breakfast €22; ☎reception 7.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9.30pm; ☎) Bordeaux' only hostel is housed in an ultramodern building with a self-catering kitchen, good wheelchair access and table football, to boot. From the train station, follow cours de la Marne northwest for 300m and turn left opposite the park; the hostel's about 250m ahead on your left.

**Eating**

All that fine wine needs fine cuisine to accompany it, and Bordeaux has some excellent restaurants. Place du Parlement, rue du Pas St-Georges and rue des Faussets have a plethora. There are also scads of inexpensive cafés and restaurants around place de la Victoire. The former warehouse district of the Quai des Marques now houses dozens of waterfront restaurants, bars and factory shops. It's a nice place for a sunset meal or drink.

**Le Cheverus Café**

BRASSERIE €

(02 05 56 48 29 73; 81-83 rue du Loup; menus from €10.50; ☎closed Sun) In a city full of neighbourhood bistros, this one, smack in the city centre, is one of the most impressive. It's friendly, cosy and chaotically busy (be prepared to wait for a table at lunchtime). The food tastes fresh and home-cooked and it dares to veer slightly away from the bistro standards of steak and chips. The lunch menus, which include wine, are an all-out bargain.

**La Tupina**

GASTRONOMIC €€

(02 05 56 91 56 37; 6 rue Porte de la Monnaie; menus €16/60, mains €18-40) Filled with the aroma of soup simmering inside an old *tupina* ('kettle' in Basque) over an open fire, this white-tableclothed place is feted far and wide for its seasonal southwestern French specialities such as a minicasserole of foie gras and eggs, milk-fed lamb or goose wings with potatoes and parsley. A €16 lunch *menu* is available on weekdays. La Tupina is a 10-minute walk upriver from the city centre and on a small side street. Any local can point you in the right direction.

BORDELAISE CUISINE – JEAN-PIERRE XIRADAKI

For me the best moment is when I catch the *bonheur* (happiness) in people's eyes, usually as they are eating a particular dish. I was born in Blaye, 50km from Bordeaux, and my cuisine is *paysanne* (country cuisine), rustic; it uses only the best products and traditional recipes from the southwest.

Jean-Pierre Xiradaki's Don't Miss List

Marché des Capucins *Cuisine bordelaise* (Bordeaux cuisine) originates from the south, from Basque-country women who came to work in the great Bordelaise houses. The diversity of produce is enormous. We have river and sea fish, shellfish, oysters, fowl (duck and geese), lamb, beef, mushrooms, vegetables, poultry, truffles... We really have everything, although we miss cheese. I buy my produce from local producers and markets: Marché des Capucins (see p622) in Bordeaux and the twice-weekly market in Blaye (Wednesday and Saturday mornings).

Cassoulet, Macaronade and Eels I love *cassoulet*, typical to the rural southwest and traditionally eaten to celebrate; it's a heart-warming haricot-bean stew with a few giblets, a bit of sausage and some pork thrown in. Then there's *macaronade aux cèpes et au foie gras*, fresh macaroni with local ceps (boletus mushrooms), foie gras and cream. It is very rich, very delicious and demands a healthy appetite! *Lamproie à la bordelaise* (eel-like lamprey), a migratory river fish cooked with wine and leeks, is very typical of our local cuisine.

La Soupe In winter at La Tupina (p620), we always have a cauldron of soup cooking in the fireplace; the fire burns all day just as it did at my grandparents'. We throw in cabbage, carrots, beans, a bit of duck or pork to give it taste and so on, just as peasants did centuries ago. For them it provided all the daily nutrition they needed – water, vegetables and a little meat.

Wine and Oysters Bordelaise essentials! **L'Essentiel** (☎05 57 24 39 76; 6 rue Guadel) in St-Émilion is the place to taste wine, and La Boîte à Huitres (p621), a seafood and shellfish restaurant in Bordeaux, is the *dégustation* (tasting) address for oysters. Favourite wine producers to taste and buy include **Château Mayne Lalande** (7 route du Mayne) and **Château Lestage** (www.chateau-lestage.com), both 35km north of Bordeaux in Listrac.

Things You Need To Know

Local markets Every village has a morning food market at least once a week.

Saucy! Anything *à la bordelaise* comes in a wine-based sauce spiced with parsley, shallots and bone marrow.

Cooking lessons With Bordelaise chef Nicolas Frion at the École de Cuisine au Chapon Fin (p618).

Jean-Pierre Xiradaki is a culinary writer and celebrity restaurant owner. He was interviewed by author Nicola Williams.

La Boîte à Huîtres

SEAFOOD €

(☎05 56 81 64 97; 36 cours du Chapeau Rouge; menus/mains €18/8) This rickety, wood-panelled little place feels like an Arcachon fisherman's hut. It's a sensation that's quite appropriate because this is by far the best place in Bordeaux to munch on fresh Arcachon oysters. Traditionally they're served

with sausage but you can have them in a number of different forms, including with that other southwest delicacy, foie gras. They'll also pack them up so you can take them away for a riverfront picnic.

Baud et Millet

CHEESE & WINE €€

(☎05 56 79 05 77; 19 rue Huguerie; menus €23-25, mains €16-18) If you like cheese or wine,

OYSTERS AT CAPUCINS

A classic Bordeaux experience is a Saturday morning spent slurping oysters and white wine from one of the seafood stands to be found at **Marché des Capucins** (6 oysters glass of wine €6; ☀7am-noon). Afterwards you can peruse the stalls while shopping for the freshest ingredients to take on a picnic to one of the city's parks. To get there, head south down cours Pasteur and once at place de la Victoire turn left onto rue Élie Gintre.

or both of them, then this cute neighbourhood place with over 250 different cheeses served in myriad forms (including a cheese *tagine*!) and almost as many wines is unmissable. Serious *fromage* fans should go for the all-you-can-eat cheese buffet.

L'Estaquade

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎05 57 54 02 50; quai de Queyries; menu €50, mains €22-26) Set on stilts, this place juts out off the river's eastern bank. The seafood (bass, cod, scampi, scallops etc) and meat dishes (like pigeon with port and black-currant sauce) served here even manage to eclipse the magical views of Bordeaux' neoclassical architecture. From place de la Bourse, you'll see the restaurant on the other side of the river.

Karl

INTERNATIONAL €€

(☎05 56 81 01 00; place du Parlement; brunch €20; ☀8.30am-7.30pm; ♣) Simply *the* place in town for a morning after the night before brunch. These range from a light continental-style affair to the full works with salmon, cheeses, hams and eggs. It's just as good for a snack at any time of the day and is perpetually packed with a young crowd.

L'Entrecôte

BRASSERIE €€

(☎05 56 81 76 10; 4 cours du 30 Juillet; menu €16.50) Opened in 1966, this unpretentious place doesn't take reservations and it has only one menu option. But Bordeaux locals continue to queue for its succulent thin-sliced meat (heated underneath by tea-light candles and topped with a 'secret recipe' sauce made from shallots and bone marrow), salad and unlimited homemade *frites*.

Self-Catering

For a taste of Bordeaux (that for once doesn't involve wine!), head to **Baillardran** (www.baillardran.com; place des Grands Hommes), which has several branches in town, including one in the Galerie des Grands Hommes shopping centre, where you can watch the chefs make *canelés*, a local vanilla-infused fluted cake. In the shopping centre's basement is a **Carrefour supermarket**. Nearby, you'll find **Jean d'Alos** (4 rue Montesquieu), a fine *fromagerie* with over 150 raw-milk and farm cheeses.



Drinking

Considering its synonymy with wine, Bordeaux has surprisingly few bars, meaning restaurants and bistros tend to fill the gap.

Student hang-outs ring place de la Victoire, such as perennial favourite **Chez Auguste** (3 place de La Victoire).

L'Autre Petit Bois

BAR €

(12 place du Parlement) Decorated in an arresting 'modern' baroque and art deco style, this very popular wine bar full of curly-whirly sofas verges on the kitsch but pulls it off with style.

Café Brun

JAZZ BAR €

(45 rue St-Rémi) A warm atmosphere and cool jazz make this bar-bistro great for an evening aperitif.

L'Orangerie du Jardin Public

CAFÉ €

(Jardin Public; ☀lunch; ♣) Bliss out with a drink, light lunch (menu €9) and the flowers in this colourful glass-fronted building on the edge of the Jardin Public.



Entertainment

Details of events appear in *Clubs & Concerts* (www.clubsetconcerts.com, in French), available for free at the tourist office.

Concert and event tickets can be purchased from the **Virgin Megastore billerie** (15-19 place Gambetta).

Nightclubs & Live Music

Trendy pedestrianised streets like rue St-Rémi are good bets to get the evening started. For zoning reasons, many of the city's late-night dance venues are a few blocks northeast of Gare St-Jean along the river, on quai de la Paludate. Clubs also cluster along the river north of the city centre. Bouncers can be selective but there's normally no cover charge.

Le Port de la Lune

NIGHTCLUB

(www.leportdelalune.com; 58 quai de la Paludate) Gigs at this dark, atmospheric jazz club are posted on the website.

Rock School Barbey

MUSIC

(☎05 56 33 66 00; www.rockschool-barbey.com, in French; 18 cours Barbey) Catch regular live bands at the rock school, which has a regular stream of up-coming French and international indie bands playing as well as various exhibitions. It's almost next door to the Auberge de Jeunesse.

Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville

BAR

(4 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville) A mainly gay crowd kicks up its heels at this bar, which has outrageous shows on Sundays.

Theatre & Classical Music**Grand Théâtre**

OPERA

(☎05 56 00 85 95; www.opera-bordeaux.com, in French; place de la Comédie) Designed by Victor Louis (of Chartres Cathedral fame), the 18th-century Grand Théâtre stages operas, ballets and concerts of orchestral and chamber music. Guided behind-the-scenes tours of the building (€3) are possible on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons at 3pm, 4pm and 5pm.

Théâtre Femina

THEATRE

(☎05 56 52 45 19; www.theatrefemina.fr, in French; 10 rue de Grassi) Plays, dance performances, variety shows and concerts.

Cinemas**Cinéma Utopia**

CINEMA

(www.cinemas-utopia.org/bordeaux, in French; 3 place Camille Jullian) Screens nondubbed art-house films.

**Shopping**

Europe's longest pedestrian shopping street, rue Ste-Catherine, is probably the city's low point. The southern end, towards place de la Victoire, is the worst half – essentially, an unending shambles of kebab shops. To give the road its dues though, things are better at the northern end where slightly classier chain shops predominate and you'll find the **Galerie Bordelaise** (rue de la Porte Dijeaux & rue Ste-Catherine) 19th-century shopping arcade.

Luxury-label boutiques concentrate within *le triangle*, formed by the allées de Tourny, cours Georges Clemenceau and cours de l'Intendance.

Antique market

MARKET

(place St-Michel) Stalls of antiques fill the square on Sunday mornings. Located a 700m walk down river from the city centre.

Bordeaux Magnum

WINE

(3 rue Gobineau) Speciality wine shop.

L'Intendant

WINE

(2 allées de Tourny). A central spiral staircase climbing four floors is surrounded by cylindrical shelves holding 15,000 bottles of regional wine.

Bradley's Bookshop

BOOKS

(8 cours d'Albret) Stacks of English-language books and guides.

Librairie Mollat

BOOKS

(15 rue Vital Carles) Books in several different languages.

i Information**Internet Access**

Le Cyb (23 cours Pasteur; per hr €2.50;

☎10am-2am Mon-Sat, 2pm-midnight Sun)

Medical Services & Emergency

Hôpital St-André (☎05 56 79 56 79; 1 rue Jean Burguet)

Police station (☎05 57 85 77 77; 23 rue François de Sourdis; ☎24hr)

Money

Banks offering currency exchange can be found near the tourist office on cours de l'Intendance, rue de l'Esprit des Lois and cours du Chapeau Rouge.

Post

The post offices at 43 place Gambetta and place St-Projet are open from 9am to 12.30pm and 1.30pm to 5pm on Saturday in addition to weekdays.

DON'T MISS**A TIPPLE WITH THE BEST**

When in Rome do like the Romans, and when in Bordeaux drink wine in wine's Holy of Holies. The ultrastyl-ish but very accessible **Bar du Vin** (3 cours du 30 Juillet; glass of wine from €3, with cheese from €5; ☎11am-10pm Mon-Sat), inside the hallowed halls of the Maison du Vin de Bordeaux, is the place to come for a tipple with people who really know their wine from their beer.

Main post office (37 rue du Château d'Eau)

Tourist Information

Bordeaux Monumental (☎05 56 48 04 24; 28 rue des Argentiers; ☼9.30am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun) Specialist tourist office dedicated to the city's history. Hosts free multimedia presentations plus temporary exhibitions with a historical theme.

Main tourist office (☎05 56 00 66 00; www.bordeaux-tourisme.com; 12 cours du 30 Juillet; ☼9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6.30pm Sun) Runs an excellent range of city and regional tours.

Maison du Tourisme de la Gironde (☎05 56 52 61 40; www.tourisme-gironde.fr; 21 cours de l'Intendance; ☼9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Sat) Information on the Gironde département.

Train station tourist office (☼9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 1-3pm Sun) Small but helpful branch outside the train station building.

i Getting There & Away

AIR Bordeaux airport (☎05 56 34 50 00; www.bordeaux.aeroport.fr) is in Mérignac, 10km west of the city centre, with domestic and increasing numbers of international flights to most west European and North African destinations.

BUS Citram Aquitaine (www.citram.fr, in French) runs most buses to destinations in the Gironde.

International bus operator **Eurolines** (32 rue Charles Domercq) faces the train station.

CAR Rental companies have offices in the train-station building and at the airport.

TRAIN Bordeaux is one of France's major rail-transit points. The station, Gare St-Jean, is about 3km from the city centre at the southern terminus of cours de la Marne.

Paris Gare Montparnasse €70, three hours, at least 16 daily

Bayonne €28, two hours

La Rochelle €27, 2½ hours

Nantes €45, four hours

Poitiers €36, 1¼ hours

Toulouse from €33, 2¼ hours

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

The train station, place Gambetta and the main tourist office are connected to the airport (one way €7) by **Jet'Bus** (☎05 56 34 50 50). The first bus leaves the airport at 7.45am from outside

Terminal B (last at 10.45pm daily); the first departure to the airport from the train station is at 6.45am Monday to Friday, and 7.30am Saturday and Sunday (last at 9.45pm daily), with buses at 45-minute intervals throughout the day. The trip takes approximately 45 minutes. A taxi costs around €50.

Bicycle

Le Vélo de la Club (www.vclub.fr; per min €0.15) is Bordeaux' version of the cheap citywide pick-up and drop-off bike hire (€1 for 24 hours). Collection points are on all major squares and elsewhere.

Bus & Tram

Urban buses and trams are run by **TBC** (www.infotbc.com, in French). The company has Espace Bus information-ticket offices at the train station and place Gambetta (4 rue Georges Bonnac) and at esplanade des Quinconces. Tram line C links the train station with the city centre via the riverside.

Single tickets (€1.40) are sold onboard buses, and from machines at tram stops (stamp your ticket onboard). Tickets aren't valid for transfers.

Night buses operate until 1.30am on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights; line 11 links place de la Victoire with the nightclub zone on quai de la Paludate.

Car

City parking is pricey and hard to find. Look for free spaces in the side streets north of the Musée d'Art Contemporain and west of the Jardin Public.

Taxi

To order a taxi try ☎05 56 96 00 34 or ☎05 56 29 10 25.

St-Émilion

POP 2160

The medieval village of St-Émilion perches above vineyards renowned for producing full-bodied, deeply coloured red wines and is easily the most alluring of all the region's wine towns. Named after Émilion, a miracle-working Benedictine monk who lived in a cave here between 750 and 767, it soon became a stop on pilgrimage routes, and the village and its vineyards are now Unesco-listed. Today, it's well worth venturing 40km east from Bordeaux to experience St-Émilion's magic, particularly when the sun sets over the valley and the

THE MÉDOC

Northwest of Bordeaux, along the western shore of the Gironde Estuary – formed by the confluence of the Garonne and Dordogne Rivers – lie some of Bordeaux' most celebrated vineyards. To their west, fine-sand beaches, bordered by dunes and *étangs* (lagoons), stretch from Pointe de Grave south along the Côte d'Argent (Silver Coast) to the Bassin d'Arcachon and beyond, with some great surf (see the boxed text, p645). On the banks of the muddy Gironde, the port town of **Pauillac** (population 1300) is at the heart of the wine country, surrounded by the distinguished Haut-Médoc, Margaux and St-Julien appellations. The Pauillac wine appellation encompasses 18 *crus classés* including the world-renowned Mouton Rothschild, Latour and Lafite Rothschild. The town's tourist office houses the **Maison du Tourisme et du Vin** (☎05 56 59 03 08; www.pauillac-medoc.com; La Verrerie; ☉9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun), which has information on châteaux and how to visit them.

The lack of a public-transport system to most of the châteaux means this area is best explored in your own car or on one of the tours organised by the tourist office in Bordeaux. There are several different types of tour, which get chopped and changed on a regular basis; at the time of research, half-day **Médoc tours** taking in two châteaux and including wine tastings left the Bordeaux tourist office at 1.30pm on Thursdays and Saturdays (tours run to other wine regions the rest of the week) at a cost of €30. On Wednesdays the tourist office runs a day-long **Médoc 1855 tour** (with lunch €90; ☉tours 9.15am), which takes in three of the best known châteaux (the actual châteaux visited vary). Day-long **La Winery** tours (see below) also depart from Bordeaux' tourist office on Tuesdays and Saturdays at 9.45am. The cost of €45 includes a tasting session and lunch. For any of these tours, advance reservations are essential. **Bordeaux Excursions** (www.bordeaux-excursions.com) customises private wine-country tours, starting from €190 for one to five people (excluding châteaux fees) for a half-day trip.

If you're travelling under your own steam, the Maison du Vin de Bordeaux supplies free, colour-coded maps of production areas, details on châteaux and the addresses of local *maisons du vin* (tourist offices that mainly deal with winery visits). One of the easiest châteaux to visit is **Château Lanessan** (☎05 56 58 94 80; www.lanessan.com; Cussac-Fort-Médoc; adult/teenagers €8/2), which offers daily hour-long tours throughout the year including ones tailored to children and hard-to-please teenagers; advance reservations required.

The Médoc is an easy day trip from Bordeaux, but should you have wine-heavy eyes at the end of the day there are numerous *chambres d'hôte* in the area or, in the village of Margaux, try the **Le Pavillon de Margaux** (☎05 57 88 77 54; www.pavillonmargaux.com; 3 rue Georges Mandel, Margaux; d from €95; ☎), a welcoming, family-run place with rooms styled according to famous local châteaux. The same family also runs the highly extravagant **Château Marojallia** (☎05 57 88 77 54; www.marojallia.com; 2 rue du Général de Gaulle, Margaux; d €175-270; ☎), a truly palatial pad that goes well with the region's wines. Courses in cookery and wine making are also available here.

While you're in the area, don't miss Philippe Raoux' **La Winery** (☎05 56 39 04 90; www.lawinery.fr, in French; Rond-point des Vendangeurs, D1, Arsac-en-Médoc). A first for France, this vast glass-and-steel wine centre mounts concerts and contemporary-art exhibits alongside various fee-based tastings, including innovative tastings that determine your *signe œnologique* ('wine sign') costing from €16 (booking required), and stocks over 1000 different wines.

limestone buildings glow with halolike golden hues.

Note that the cobbled streets and steep hills of the village make it difficult for travellers with disabilities to get around, but three new trails that allow mobility-impaired visitors to see at least some of the sites are plotted on free maps available from the tourist office.

Sights

Clocher

TOWER

(bell tower; admission €1.25) For captivating views of the hilltop hamlet, collect the key from the tourist office to climb above the church. The entrance is on place des Créneaux.

Collégiale

CHURCH

(Collegiate Church) A domed Romanesque 12th-century nave dominates the former Collégiale, which also boasts an almost-square vaulted choir built between the 14th and 16th centuries. **Cloître de l'Église Collégiale**, the church's tranquil 12th- to 14th-century cloister, is the venue for special events.

Porte de la Cadène

CITY WALLS

(Gate of the Chain) Surviving sections of the town's medieval walls and gates include those running off rue Guadet.

Cloître des Cordeliers

MONASTERY

(rue Porte Brunet; admission free) Within the ruined monastery, the winery **Les Cordeliers** (guided cellar tours with/without wine tastings €3.50/2) has made sparkling wine for over a century.

Castel daou Rey

CASTLE

(admission €1.25; ☎11am-7.15pm) The 13th-century donjon known as the Tour du Roi (King's Tower) has exceptional views of the town and the Dordogne Valley.

Activities

Blind tastings and games (available in English) are a fun and informative introduction to wine tasting at **L'École du Vin de St-Émilion** (www.vignobleschateaux.fr; 4 rue du Clocher; tasting courses €29; ☎3pm Apr-Oct, by reservation Nov-Mar). The adjacent **Maison du Vin** (place Pierre Meyrat; classes €21; ☎mid-Jul-mid-Sep) also offers bilingual 1½-hour classes starting at 11am.

Eight **hiking circuits**, from 4km to 14km, loop through the greater World Heritage jurisdiction; the tourist office has maps.

Tours

The only (but highly worthwhile) way to visit the town's most interesting historical sites is with one of the tourist office's **guided tours** (adult/child €11/free). French-language tours leave from the tourist office daily at 11am, while English tours are at 11am weekends only. The **St-Émilion Souterrain** (Underground St-Émilion; adult/child €7/free) tour takes you beneath the pretty streets and into a fascinating labyrinth of catacombs – highlights are the hermit saint's famous cave, **Grotte de l'Ermitage**, and the 11th-century church, **Église Monolithe**, carved out of limestone between the 9th and the 12th centuries. Tours in French depart regularly throughout the day – call ahead to check English tour times (usually 2pm). It's chilly below ground; bring a jumper.

The tourist office organises two-hour afternoon **château visits** (adult/child €12/free; ☎tours May-Sep) in French and English. It also runs various events throughout the year, such as **La Journée Viticole** (Winemakers' Day; minimum 2 people €385; ☎11am-5pm Jun-Sep) that combines a vineyard visit, lunch, town tour and wine tasting course.

Festivals & Events

Les Grandes Heures de St-Émilion

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Classical concerts are held at various châteaux between March and December. Tickets (€30) must be booked in advance; the program is posted on the tourist-office website.

Marché du Gout

MARKET

A market selling regional products sets up in the village cloister from 10 to 15 October. The cloister is also the venue for **free concerts** from May to November; the tourist office has the program.

Sleeping & Eating

The village and its surrounds have some charming, but very expensive boutique hotels. If you're on a budget and don't want to camp, it might be better to visit on a day trip from Bordeaux. Ask the tourist office

for a list of nearby, and much cheaper, *chambres d'hôte*. Many of St-Émilion's best restaurants are attached to hotels.

VILLAGE CENTRE

Hôtel-Restaurant du Palais Cardinal

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎05 57 24 72 39; www.palais-cardinal.com; place du 11 Novembre 1918; s/d from €71/88, menus from €28; 🍷🍴🍷) Run by the same family for five generations, this hotel puts a little more thought into its dress sense than the other 'cheap' St-Émilion hotels. The heated pool is set in rambling flower-filled gardens and framed by sections of the original medieval town-wall fortifications, dating from the 13th century. It's well worth partaking in the gastronomic fare served at its restaurant (closed lunch Wednesday and Thursday, and December to March).

Auberge de la Commanderie

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €€

(☎05 57 24 70 19; www.aubergedelacommanderie.com; 2 rue Porte Brunet; r from €76; ☺mid-Feb–mid-Jan; 🍷🍴) Inside this hotel's 13th-century walls, rooms are modernised with massive murals depicting a Technicolorised pop-art version of an old black-and-white postcard of the village. Larger rooms are in an annexe over the road. Breakfast is €10.

Hostellerie de Plaisance

BOULIQUE HOTEL €€€

(☎05 57 55 07 55; www.hostellerie-plaisance.com; place du Clocher; r €350-650, ste €510-670; ☺closed Jan; 🍷🍴) With a spice-coloured bar opening to a wraparound terrace, this intimate gem in the shadow of the bell tower houses 17 whimsical rooms. (A glass lift concealed in a gazebo whisks you through the rock face down to the new wing.) The rooms are about the size of a castle and look out over a flurry of red terracotta roof tiles and a church tower, but, good as it is, you can't help feeling that it's overpriced. Breakfast is an impressive €28 per person.

Hôtel au Logis des Remparts

TRADITIONAL HOTEL €€

(☎05 57 24 70 43; www.logisdesremparts.com; 18 rue Porte Guadet; r with street/garden view from €98/140; 🍷🍴🍷) In a thoughtfully restored town house, the modern rooms are comfortable but lack much sparkle. Much more

exciting is the courtyard garden and swimming pool. Breakfast is €14.



Restaurant Hostellerie de Plaisance

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎05 57 55 07 55; www.hostellerie-plaisance.com; place du Clocher; menus €95-130; ☺closed Sun-Mon) Award-winning chef Philippe Etchebest cooks up food like you've never had before at his double-Michelin-starred restaurant housed in a dining room of egg-shell blue and white gold inside the hotel of the same name. The 'discovery menu' allows you to do just that in about eight courses. Advance reservations essential.

L'Huîtres Pie

SEAFOOD €€

(☎05 57 24 69 71; 11 rue de la Porte Bouqueyre; lunch/dinner menus €18/32; ☺closed Tue & Wed) Arcachon oysters and other seafood feature heavily in the dishes on offer here, but if slippery shellfish don't do it for you, tuck into one of the hearty meat or fish dishes. You can eat inside or outside on the pleasant olive-shaded courtyard.

L'Envers du Décor

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎05 57 74 48 31; <http://l'envers-dudecor.com>; 11 rue du Clocher; lunch/dinner menus €19/30) Warmed by a wood fire in the cooler months and with a shady terrace hidden down an alleyway for the warmer ones, this local favourite serves market-fresh dishes.

AROUND ST-ÉMILION

Grand Barrail

HISTORIC HOTEL €€€

(☎05 57 55 37 00; www.grand-barrail.com; rte de Libourne/D243; r from €290, menus from €28; 🍷🍴🍷) Grand doesn't even begin to describe this immense 1850-built château, 3km from the village, with its decadent on-site spa, stone-flagged heated swimming pool, free state-of-the-art fitness room, wheelchair access and, if you happen to be arriving by helicopter, its own helipad on the front lawns. Undoubtedly the best seat in its restaurant is the corner table framed by 19th-century stained glass that would make the average church green with envy.

Château de Roques

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎05 57 74 55 69; www.chateau-de-roques.com; Puisseguin; d €71-111, menus from €24; 🍷🍴) If you've dreamed of staying in a romantic countryside château but your budget – or lack thereof – was a rude awakening, you'll

be delighted by this affordable 16th-century place in the vineyards, 5km outside St-Émilion. Its restaurant (closed late December to early February) serves foie gras with Cognac and jelly made from locally produced Sauternes white wine. There's good wheelchair access. The best road is the D122 (north from St-Émilion) – the château is just near the junction of the D21.

Camping Domaine de la Barbanne

CAMPGROUND €

(☎05 57 24 75 80; www.camping-saint-emilion.com; rte de Montagne; sites per 2 people, tent & car €30; ☼Apr-Sep; ♿) This family-friendly campground about 2km north of St-Émilion on the D122. There's a five-night minimum for camping in July and August. Cabins, sleeping up to five people, are also available.

Self-catering

Boulangeries (bakeries), such as the one on rue de la Grande Fontaine, open to around 7pm. A **market** fills place de la Porte Bouqueyre every Sunday. **Utile Grocery** (☎8am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun May–mid-Sep) is a supermarket on the D122, 150m north of town.



Shopping

St-Émilion's sloping streets and squares are lined with about 50 wine shops – one for every eight of the old city's residents. The largest is the **Maison du Vin** (place Pierre Meyrat; ☎9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm), which is owned by the 250 châteaux whose wines it sells at cellar-door prices. It also has a free aromatic exhibit and sells specialist publications. If you think St-Émilion is a good place to get a few bottles of cut-price cheapo wine, then think again. It's all quality only, with price tags to match – a very fast perusal of a few shops showed a top-dollar price of €9200 for a bottle of Petrus 1947. Not the sort of bottle you'd want airport customs confiscating from your hand luggage!

Ursuline nuns brought the recipe for *macarons* (macaroons – almond biscuits) to St-Émilion in the 17th century. Specialist shops around town charge €6 per two dozen.



Information

The pharmacy and most banks are along rue Guadet.

Post office (rue Guadet) Can exchange currency.

Tourist kiosk (place de l'Église Monolithe) Summertime kiosk with varying hours (usually 10am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Monday to Friday and some weekends).

Tourist office (☎05 57 55 28 28; www.saint-emilion-tourisme.com; place des Créneaux; ☎9.30am-12.30pm & 1.45-6.30pm) Stacks of brochures in English and details on visiting more than 100 nearby châteaux.



Getting There & Away

BICYCLE Year-round the tourist office rents out bicycles for €15 per day.

BUS Citram Aquitaine (www.citram.fr, in French) buses to/from Bordeaux' train station run twice daily throughout the summer (single/return €8/13, from Bordeaux 9.20am and 12.25pm, from St-Émilion for Bordeaux 1.35pm and 6pm).

CAR From Bordeaux, follow the signs for Libourne and take the D243.

TAXI To book a taxi call ☎06 77 75 36 64 (www.taxi-st-emilion.com).

TRAIN It's easier to take a train from Bordeaux, with around half a dozen services a day (€8, 35min). St-Émilion station is a kilometre south of town.

Arcachon

POP 11,965

A long-time oyster-harvesting area on the southern side of the tranquil, triangular Bassin d'Arcachon (Arcachon Bay), this seaside town lured bourgeois Bordelaise at the end of the 19th century. Its four little quarters are romantically named for each of the seasons, with villas that evoke the town's golden past amid a scattering of 1950s architecture.

Arcachon seethes with sun-seekers in summer, but you'll find practically deserted beaches a short bike ride away.



Sights

Town & Beaches

TOWN, BEACHES

In the **Ville d'Été** (Summer Quarter), Arcachon's sandy beach, **Plage d'Arcachon**, is flanked by two piers. Lively **Jetée Thiers** is at the western end. In front of the eastern pier, **Jetée D'Eyrac**, stands the town's turreted **Casino de la Plage**, built by Adalbert Déganne in 1953 as an exact replica of Château de Boursault in the Marne. Inside, it's a less-grand blinking and bell-

ringing riot of poker machines and gaming tables.

On the tree-covered hillside south of the Ville d'Été, the century-old **Ville d'Hiver** (Winter Quarter) has over 300 villas, many decorated with delicate wood tracery, ranging in style from neo-Gothic through to colonial. It's an easy stroll or a short ride up the **art deco public lift** (admission free) in Parc Mauresque.

Aquarium et Musée

AQUARIUM

(2 rue du Professeur Jolyet; adult/under 10yr €5/3.50; ☎9.45am-12.15pm & 1.45-7pm) In a wooden shack opposite the casino, this aquarium has a small collection of Atlantic fish in floodlit tanks.



Activities

Ocean Roots

SURF COURSES

(☎06 62 26 04 11; www.oceanroots.com; 228 bd de la Côte d'Argent, Le Mouleau; 🏠) The exposed ocean beaches to the south of town generally offer good conditions for surfing. Ocean Roots offers lessons and rents out equipment. For more surf spots, see the boxed text, p645.

Cycling

Cycle paths link Arcachon with the Dune du Pilat and Biscarosse (30km to the south), and around the Bassin d'Arcachon to Cap Ferret. From here, a cyclable path parallels the beaches north to Pointe de Grave.



Tours

Les Bateliers Arcachonnais

BOAT TOURS

(UBA; ☎05 57 72 28 28; www.bateliers-arcachon.com, in French; 🏠) Daily, year-round cruises sail around the **Île aux Oiseaux** (adult/child €14/10), the uninhabited 'bird island' in the middle of the bay. It's a haven for tern, curlew and redshank, so bring your binoculars. In summer there are regular all-day excursions (11am to 5.30pm) to the **Banc d'Arguin** (adult/child €16/11), the sand bank off the Dune du Pilat.



Sleeping

Arcachon has scads of accommodation options. Many are chintzy mid-20th-century time warps, though not without charm.

Hôtel le Dauphin

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎05 56 83 02 89; www.dauphin-arcachon.com; 7 av Gounod; s/d from €198/108; 🍷🍷🍷🍷)

Don't miss this late-19th-century gingerbread place with patterned red-and-cream brickwork. An icon of its era, it's graced by twin semicircular staircases, magnolias and palms. Plain but spacious rooms are well set up for families. Parking is free.

Park Inn

DESIGN HOTEL €€

(☎05 56 83 99 91; www.parkinn.fr; 4 rue du Professeur Jolyet; s/d from €125/135; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) Arcachon's version of this chain is utterly distinctive, thanks to its vivid swirled carpet, candy-striped curtains and primary-coloured modular furniture. It's a bit like bouncing around in a preschoolers' playroom. There are three wheelchair-equipped rooms and the staff are a pleasure to deal with.



Eating

The bay's oysters (served raw and accompanied by the local small, flat sausages, *crepinettes*) appear on *menus* everywhere.

The beachfront promenade between Jettée Thiers and Jettée d'Eyrac is lined with restaurants and places offering pizza and crêpes, plus a couple of standout places serving seafood.

Chez Diego

SEAFOOD

(☎05 56 83 84 46; bd Veyrier-Montagnères; menu €36, mains €19-44) One of the standouts among a cluster of tourist traps.

Chez Pierre

SEAFOOD

(☎05 56 22 52 94; 1 bd Veyrier Montagnères; menus from €19, seafood platters €20-48) This see-and-be-seen restaurant serves up an ocean of seafood.

Aux Mille Saveurs

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎05 56 83 40 28; 25 bd du Général Leclerc; menus €19-48; 🍷closed dinner Sun & Tue)

In a light-filled space of flowing white tablecloths, this genteel restaurant is renowned for its traditional French fare artistically presented on fine china.



Information

Tourist office (☎05 57 52 97 97; www.arcachon.com; Esplanade Georges Pompidou; ☎9am-7pm)



Getting There & Away

There are frequent trains between Bordeaux and Arcachon (€10, 50 minutes).

OYSTER TASTE TEST

Oysters from each of the Bassin d'Arcachon's four oyster-breeding zones hint at subtly different flavours. See if you can detect these:

Banc d'Arguin – milk and sugar

Île aux Oiseaux – minerals

Cap Ferret – citrus

Grand Banc – roasted hazelnuts

Around Arcachon

DUNE DU PILAT

This colossal sand dune (sometimes referred to as the Dune de Pyla because of its location in the resort town of Pyla-sur-Mer), 8km south of Arcachon, stretches from the mouth of the Bassin d'Arcachon southwards for almost 3km. Already the largest in Europe, it's spreading eastwards at 4.5m a year – it has swallowed trees, a road junction and even a hotel.

The view from the top – approximately 114m above sea level – is magnificent. To the west you can see the sandy shoals at the mouth of the Bassin d'Arcachon, including the **Banc d'Arguin bird reserve** and Cap Ferret. Dense dark-green pine forests stretch from the base of the dune eastwards almost as far as the eye can see.

Take care swimming in this area: powerful currents swirl out to sea from the deceptively tranquil *baïnes* (little bays).

Although just a very quick trip from Arcachon, the area around the dune is an enjoyable place to kick back for a while. Most people choose to camp in one of the swag of seasonal campgrounds. Lists and information on all of these (and more bricks-and-mortar-based accommodation) can be found on www.bassin-arcachon.com.

CAP FERRET

POP 6392

Hidden within a canopy of pine trees at the tip of the Cap Ferret peninsula, the tiny village of Cap Ferret spans a mere 2km between the tranquil bay and the crashing Atlantic waves. It's crowned by its 53m-high, red-and-white **lighthouse** (adult/child €4.50/3; ☀10am-7.30pm), with interactive exhibits and stunning views of the surf from the top. If you want to get closer to the

surf, the **Surf Center** (☎05 56 60 61 05; www.surf-center.fr; 22 allées des Goëlands; ☀Jun-Sep) rents out boards and offers lessons.

Cap Ferret is littered with campgrounds, which can be tracked down on www.bassin-arcachon.com. **La Maison du Bassin** (☎05 56 60 60 63; www.lamaison.dubassin.com; 5 rue des Pionniers; s €120-200, d €140-240, apt €330; ☀closed Jan) has four dreamy rooms the size of suites tucked away in a separate annexe of this quixotic hideaway, while cosy rooms in the main house have details like a muslin-canopied sleigh bed, or a curtained bathtub in the centre of the room. Its chocolate-toned contemporary restaurant, **Le Bistrot du Bassin** (menus €25 to €60), will make your taste buds very happy indeed.

Les Bateliers Arcachonnais (UBA; www.bateliers-arcachon.com, in French) runs ferries from Arcachon to Cap Ferret (adult/child return €11.50/8) year-round. In the warmer months, seasonally operating lines include ferries linking Cap Ferret and the Dune du Pilat, and Cap Ferret and Moulleau. Schedules are posted on the website and available from tourist offices.

Cap Ferret is a scenic drive around Bassin d'Arcachon, or to drive here directly from Bordeaux (71.8km) take the D106.

GUJAN MESTRAS

POP 17,680

Picturesque oyster ports are dotted around the town of Gujan Mestras, which sprawls along 9km of coastline.

You'll find the **tourist office** (☎05 56 66 12 65; www.ville-gujanmestras.fr, in French; 19 av de Lattre de Tassigny; ☀9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun) at the western edge of town in La Hume.

Gujan Mestras' train station is on the train line linking Bordeaux with Arcachon.

👁 Sights

Le Teich Parc Ornithologique

BIRDWATCHING

(Bird Reserve; ☎05 56 22 80 93; www.parc-ornithologique-du-teich.com; adult/child €7.50/5.10; ☀10am-sunset; 📶) A series of trails wind through and around the swamps, lakes and woodlands of the idyllic Parc Ornithologique situated in Le Teich, 5km east of Gujan Mestras. Birds also find the place much to their liking and some 260 species of migratory and

nonmigratory birds call the place home. The stars of the show are the white storks, spoonbills, common cranes, marsh harriers and black kites, all of which can be spied on from a network of well-maintained hides. Away from birds, the park is one of the most reliable places in France to see the now-threatened European pond tortoise. The pool just beyond the ticket office is a real hot spot for it.

Port de Larros

Flat-bottomed oyster boats moored to weathered wooden shacks line Port de Larros, the largest oyster port around Gujan Mestras. The small **Maison de l'Huître** (adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☺10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat) has a display on oyster farming, including a short film in English. Locally harvested oysters are sold nearby and served at seafood restaurants with waterside terraces.

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